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Fantasy & Science Fiction

FEBRUARY

The Man on the Persian Carpet

Kate Wilhelm

Dale Bailey

Elizabeth Hand

Sheila Finch

Jack Williamson

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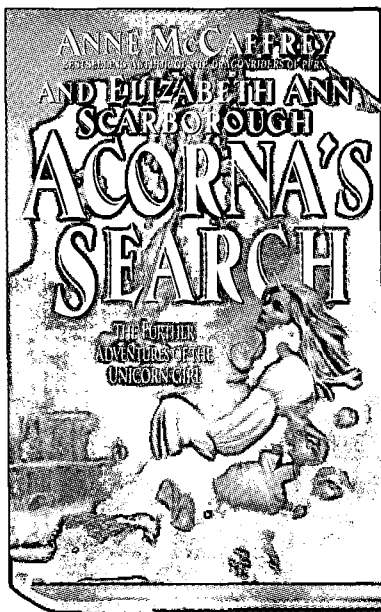


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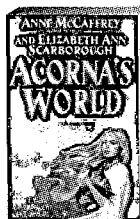
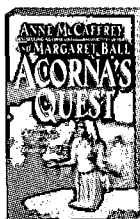
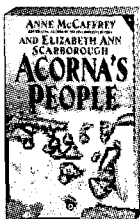
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GORDON VAN GELDER, Publisher/Editor BARBARA J. NORTON, Assistant Publisher
ROBIN O'CONNOR, Assistant Editor KEITH KAHLA, Assistant Publisher
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You might think, after all the praise heaped upon Ms. Wilhelm in our special September issue, that we'd said all we have to say about the great Kate W. But did we mention how prolific she is! In the five months since we published her novella "Yesterday's Tomorrows," Ms. Wilhelm has gone and finished another novel. This one is entitled The Unshuttered Eye, it's set in the early 1990s, and we can look forward to seeing it later this year.

Meantime, she has also found time to bring us this unusual love story about a woman who might just be able to predict the future.

The Man on the Persian Carpet

By Kate Wilhelm

CAROLYN HARLEY AND Drake Symes had fallen in and out of love ever since kindergarten when he fought Billy Driscoll for hitting her and she declared her undying love for him. Two weeks later they had fallen out of love when she saw him playing with Melanie Bosc. The next day she had fought Billy herself.

When they were twelve they discovered sex together, and she said afterward, "Is that all? That's it?"

Drake, enraptured, exalted, ready to do battle with dragons or angels, had declared his undying love for her.

"I didn't like it," she said. "It's silly and doesn't feel good, and I'm bleeding. Maybe I'm going to die and go to hell now."

"We just need practice," he said desperately.

She shook her head. "I don't think so. Maybe I'll become a lesbian or a nun."

He didn't know what a lesbian was, and the following fall when he went to the public high school and she went to St. Agnes Girls' School, he

thought that was where girls were taught how to be lesbians or nuns. She wouldn't let him touch her again until they were sixteen.

Now it was the summer following their graduations from high school and they were walking through her father's apple orchard.

Her father was an orthopedic surgeon in Middletown, New York, and he owned a forty-acre apple orchard. His father was a lineman for the telephone company. She was an only child; he had two sisters and a brother.

"I got the job," he said.

"And I have to go to France," she said, as morose as he was, but also excited by the prospect of going to Paris. "With Mother," she added, and he nodded in sympathy.

They walked in silence for a time, then she said, "Tell me about the job. You're going to work for a publisher?"

"Yeah. Old man Broccoli knows this guy who's a publisher, Oracle Publications, and he needs someone to read stuff that comes in. Broccoli recommended me. After the interview, the publisher gave me a load of books to study, so I'll know what he's up to. It's all crazy stuff, astrology, Nostradamus revealed, how to get in touch with the inner self.... Nut-books."

"It sounds like fun," Carolyn said. "Can I see them?"

"Sure." He had taken the job because he could work his own hours all through college; if he didn't work he couldn't go to college. He had been accepted by NYU, and Carolyn would go to Radcliffe.

"And the summer we both graduate," he said then, getting back to the topic, "we go to Europe. Right? I'll save every cent I can, we'll be of age, and you'll have money by then from your grandmother. Deal?"

"Deal," she said.

She borrowed several of the books, then, a day or two before she left for her trip, she made his handprints. "For practice," she said. "Maybe I'll become a palmist."

He groaned. "What have I done?"

She got the wrong kind of ink, and for the rest of the summer he had black palms, with the ink fading away slowly. First the mounts emerged, like rounded hills rising from black water — the mount of Apollo, mount

of Jupiter, of Venus, Saturn — leaving dark valleys until they faded also and only the lines remained deeply etched in black. It seemed appropriate to have his life- and heart-lines etched in black.

Eddie Norwich, the publisher of Oracle Publications, was a diminutive man in his mid-fifties, five feet two, a hundred ten pounds after a big meal, with a surprisingly deep voice that made him impressive over the telephone. Apparently he bought his clothes in the boys' department of a discount store: chinos, T-shirt with a motorcycle logo on the pocket, high-top court shoes. A green and brown plaid sport coat hung over the back of his chair, a blue necktie dripped from the side pocket of the coat onto the floor.

There were two other people in the offices, Becky Russo, thirty-something, a dimpled bottle-blond, who at five feet nine or ten towered over her employer; she was the production department. Clyde Dinwiddie, who appeared to be a hundred years old, bald, stooped, with protruding eyes and no eyebrows, was the bookkeeping department.

Drake would get to know them all well, but that day he was overwhelmed by books in every stage from inspiration to publication: Manuscripts, bound galleys, page proofs, copyedited manuscripts, unopened boxes and bulging envelopes, completed books with dust jackets.... Every flat surface was piled high in Eddie's inner office and the outer office that Becky and Clyde shared; there were heaps and stacks on the floor, and against one wall the boxes of manuscripts reached the ceiling.

"We got behind," Eddie said, scowling at the chaos about them. "Every nut out there thinks he's got a piece of the truth and wants to tell the world about it. But we do forty-eight books a year. Period. So ninety-nine percent of what comes through the door gets sent back — if they provided return postage. If not, in the trash with it. But someone's got to check them out. Who knows when the next Castaneda will turn up? Becky will walk you through some of those manuscripts."

Becky frowned. "You know I got those galleys, and a new manuscript from Madame Frieda...."

"Just the rudiments," Eddie said. "He's a smart kid. He'll catch on fast. I gotta call what's-his-name back...." He withdrew to his inner office and closed the door.

The first lesson Drake learned was that whatever Eddie didn't want

to do, or didn't have time to do, he delegated to Becky, and before very long, to Drake.

Then he began to learn how to read the slushpile, the over-the-transom, unagented manuscripts, unasked for, unloved and unwanted. Written in crayon on brown paper bags — out. Dim pencil on lined paper — out. Dictated by Jesus — out. Verse — out. Yeti — out....

While Carolyn was learning how to shop in Paris, how to order dinner in the finest restaurants, what to look for in the museums, he was learning about the new interpretation of the pyramids, the secret meaning of the Book of Revelation, the hidden messages on the backs of ancient sea turtles, what Nostradamus really meant, how to bend the will of the world to do your bidding.... He understood now the myth of the Augean stable. No matter how fast he read, and he got better at it day by day, the stacks did not appear to be reduced.

THEN CAROLYN returned from her month-long vacation, and the next day he was standing at the door of the train long before the Middletown stop was called. Her father was at the clinic that day, her mother was out, while at his house his mother and one sister were both at home. "My house," Carolyn had said on the phone the night before. She met his train, and they held each other hard, not kissing, not in public, but straining toward each other.

"Let's beat it," he said huskily.

She drove; he didn't own a car since it would have been a hassle in New York City. He watched her profile as she drove and talked.

"I kept a diary of all the places I want to go back to with you. A boat ride on the Seine at night; the Eiffel Tower is all lighted up and looks like it's made out of gold...."

He was thinking, *Hurry! Hurry! Drive faster!*

Her house was one of the biggest in Middletown, an old-fashioned two-story building with fluted columns, like a colonial mansion. The driveway was flanked by two mature blue spruce trees; other trees and shrubs screened the house from the street. She pulled into the driveway, hit the brake, and opened her door almost as fast as he opened his; arm in arm they raced to the house.

Inside, he grabbed her and they kissed, a long, deep kiss that left them trembling. When she drew back and took his hand, she turned toward the living room, and she gasped.

"Drake! Look!"

A naked man facing away from the door lay on the red Sarouk rug, one of his legs drawn up almost in a fetal position, the back of his head visible.

Carolyn took a step toward the naked man and Drake pulled her back. "He must be one of your dad's patients," he said. His voice was hoarse, raspy. "We'd better call nine one one."

"Is he dead? He looks dead!" she said in a whisper.

He tugged on her arm. "Where's the nearest phone?"

"We should see if he's dead."

"No. Don't go near him. He could be an escaped convict, or a dangerous lunatic. Come on, a telephone."

He pulled her to her father's study and dialed the emergency number. He was talking to the dispatcher when Carolyn went to the hall door and said, "I'll see if he's moved or anything. I won't go into the living room, just from the doorway."

He was holding on, the way the dispatcher told him to, when Carolyn screamed. "Jesus!" he cried and dropped the phone, tore back through the hall to the living room. She was standing in the doorway, both hands pressed to her face, staring wide-eyed, wild-eyed at the place where the man had been. He was gone. When Drake touched her, she screamed again.

"He was getting up! He looked at me and was getting up. Then he disappeared! He looked at me and got up, and then he disappeared."

Bone-white down to her lips, cold to the touch, she kept repeating it until he took her by the shoulders and shook her, then held her until the police arrived.

No one believed them. Carolyn couldn't describe the man: old, fifty or older, brown hair. Her mother was livid and accused Drake of drugging Carolyn. The police pursued this theory half-heartedly, then suggested that Drake's brother had played a practical joke on them. Or perhaps one of Carolyn's friends had done it.

After the police left, Dr. Harley took Drake by the arm out to the front porch and said in white-lipped fury, "She understood what you were after,

bringing her to an empty house, knowing her mother and father would not be home to protect her. She understood, all right, and did what she had to do to protect herself, at what cost only time will tell. Stay out of her life or I'll have you charged with attempted rape!"

Drake could hardly tell her father that he and Carolyn had been lovers for more than two years.

It was all bad, but the worst part was how Carolyn looked and acted; she refused to enter the living room again, and sat in the den like a marble statue, upright and rigid on the edge of a chair, with sightless eyes. When Drake tried to touch her hand, she looked at him as if at a stranger, and recoiled.

She couldn't explain to herself or anyone else the terror she had felt when the naked man began to pull himself up to his feet, when he looked straight at her as if he recognized her, a look of triumph, of mastery, ownership. And then he vanished.

Over the next weeks her mother talked on and on about drugs, the power of a tiny bit of "something mind-altering," and its effects on the innocent. Her father nattered about nervous exhaustion, all that flying around, shopping, auto-hallucinations. A counselor droned about Freudian implications, even though she herself was not, she declared, definitely not a Freudian, but still.... Carolyn said little, and prayed for the start of college and escape from home.

She did not accept any calls from Drake, and returned none of his calls, refused to see him when he came around, and she could not explain this. When her mother said with satisfaction that she had finally gotten over a childhood crush, she did not refute it, or agree. But something had ended. At long last the summer ended and she was in college.

Madam Zelda's name was Wilma Thorpe, but who would let a Wilma Thorpe read a palm, she said that afternoon when Carolyn came around. It was a year after her first visit. Today Zelda sat gazing at Carolyn for a long time before she said, "We can talk about it. You tell me why you want me to become your teacher, and I'll tell you why you should let it drop. You first."

A tall, thin woman with frizzy carrot hair and green eyes, Zelda wore orange rouge and heavy lipstick the color of burgundy, too many rings,

bracelets and necklaces, long swishy skirts and frilly blouses, and emerald velvet slippers with pointed toes. She could have been in her thirties, or sixty plus. Now, as she spoke, and in the awkward silence that followed, she began to pull off ring after ring, then the bracelets, the necklaces.

They were seated at the table she used for her palmistry sessions, a sturdy card table with a dark red velvet cloth, two lamps, one with a beaded shade and dim light, the other a high-intensity halogen light that gave off a lot of heat. She had not turned it on.

Carolyn watched the pile of jewelry grow — dragon's trove, she thought; she supposed all the stones were paste, but they looked as good as her mother's real gemstones.

"I think I've gone as far as I can by myself," she said. "I've read the books, all I could find, but that's not enough. I need help when I get confused, someone who will explain things in a way the books don't."

Zelda touched her hair. Carolyn watched, fascinated, fearing she would remove it the way she had removed the jewelry. Zelda laughed. "It's real," she said. "Last year you came with friends, as I recall. Do you believe in palmistry?"

Carolyn swallowed. "You remember that I came last year? Why?"

"You had a very interesting hand, and you denied much of what I told you. Now you're back. I find that interesting too. Do you believe in palmistry?"

Carolyn knew she should say yes, or what was the point, but she shook her head. "I don't know. Sometimes I do, then I don't."

"Good. That's how it should be now. You're still in college?"

"Yes. In July I'll be twenty-one, and I have one more year of school, but then what? I'm not qualified to get any kind of job. I don't know anything for sure. I can't think of anything I want to do with the rest of my life."

"You probably won't be able to support yourself with palmistry," Zelda said, leaning back in her chair, her face deeply shadowed. "Many people who welcome you now will turn away from you, shun you. You would be regarded as a curiosity at best, a freak or even a witch at worst. If you take it up seriously, you will devote years to mastering it, and you will never know if you have learned enough."

When she paused, Carolyn said, "And I might not even be capable of being more than just a dabbler."

Zelda came forward in her chair, smiling slightly. "Oh, you're capable. What did I tell you that was untrue?"

"You said I was leading a double life, that I would lead a double life in the future. That a terrible break would occur that would affect my heart, my head, my lifeline. But it already had happened; it wasn't something to come. And I didn't think I was leading a double life."

"And now?"

"You were right about the double life," Carolyn said in a low voice. "I'm just going through the motions, pretending I'm interested in school, pretending I'm in the rat race looking for a man, a good job, children, all the rest. I'm pretending all the time, and watching myself perform. And the other part was right too, just the timing was off."

Zelda stood up. "Excuse me a minute or two. I'll gather some hands for you to look over. We'll see."

When she returned with her face scrubbed clean, her frizzy hair tamed with a ribbon, she appeared closer to thirty than to sixty years old. She swept all the jewelry into a box, then opened a folder and took out a handprint, laid it down before Carolyn. "Testing," she said, turning on the halogen lamp. "Testing."

Shyly, hesitantly, feeling as uncomfortable as a sinner going into the confessional, Carolyn began reading the hand. When she ran out of things to say, Zelda brought out a second handprint, then a third, a fourth.

"You're tired," she said at last, interrupting Carolyn for the first time. "One more thing. We'll do your prints, and then talk a bit."

As if from a distance, watching two other people, Carolyn watched her roll ink onto a white tile, then, with the roller well coated, watched her apply the ink to Carolyn's hand. Zelda's touch was firm when she pressed Carolyn's hand onto the white paper and got a perfect print the first time. She made a thumb print, and did the other hand, and afterward led Carolyn to a bathroom sink and turned on the water, handed her soap. When they returned to her living room, she motioned toward a brocade-covered chair, and seated herself in one just like it with a low table between them.

"Let's talk about scheduling," she said.

July came in with thunderstorms and sultry interludes between the outbursts. Carolyn's mother was in a state, outdoors or indoors? There

had to be a party; it wasn't every day you turned twenty-one, and inherited a fortune. Of course, there had to be a party, just for family and intimate friends, not a big adolescent brawl with a keg and too-loud music.

Carolyn tuned her out. She had to stay home long enough for the party, she had decided, but the following day she would go back to Boston, back to her own apartment, back to her studies with Zelda.

Swimming in the pool behind the big house where she had grown up, she felt like a hotel guest, a transient, perfectly well-behaved, polite, distant.

She had glanced over the guest list for the party, and stopped with a groan at the name of Stephen Yost. Her fault; she had pulled his name out of nowhere as an excuse to leave the day after Christmas. That was enough. Her mother had followed up, and now Stephen was invited to her birthday party, and he would assume that it was Carolyn's doing, that she was making a play for him. He was no more than an acquaintance, a friend of a friend of a friend, the way it went in college circles, Radcliffe women, Harvard men. Only he was not a student, but a tenured professor. Carolyn had no doubt that her mother knew that by now, knew who his parents were, what color socks he wore, what kind of cereal he preferred.

Drake's name was not on the list, nor did she bring it up. But she remembered with a pang the deal they had made, that they would go to Europe together as soon as they both graduated. She swam harder, at war with herself. It was as if scar tissue had formed over a wound that had never healed properly, a wound that lay quiescent, almost forgotten unless she picked at it, and then throbbed and surged back to life as it did now because she had let herself think of him, of that last day with him. She knew with certainty that she had to leave that wound alone, that it was accompanied by a fear that was incomprehensible and overwhelming; the scar tissue held both the wound and the terror safely encased.

But her body longed for him with an insistence like a low-grade fever that flared unpredictably. At those times, like now, she knew that if they met, if she chanced upon him, she would be lost.

Because her terror was irrational, causeless, she could not talk of it, could not confide in anyone; she would not know how to begin.

Thunder rumbled, still distant, but warning of another turbulent afternoon. She pulled herself from the swimming pool, wrapped a beach

blanket around her, and reentered the house. The doorbell was ringing. She glanced down at herself, shrugged, and went to the door.

Stephen Yost stood there with a small gift-wrapped box in his hand. She had not been able to summon a picture of him in her mind when she saw his name on the list, she had forgotten how wide he was. A box of a man, she thought, with a big head that appeared curiously squared due to a bad haircut. Apparently he seldom got out in the sunlight; he was pale, with dark eyes. For a moment neither spoke. He looked at her bare feet, her dripping hair, and then he was inside pushing the door closed.

"I had to come early," he said. "I can't make it tomorrow, but I wanted to give you something. For your birthday. Thanks for asking me. I never dreamed you had even noticed me." He put the box on the side table and for another moment simply looked at her, and then he was pulling the beach blanket away from her shoulders, and she was backing up into the living room.

She offered no resistance, as if this were what she had planned, what she wanted to happen, watching herself yield to him without a word, listening to his fragmented speech. He spread the blanket on the red Sarouk rug and they coupled where the naked man had lain and risen two years earlier.

WHEN THE THUNDER rumbled, Drake was on his bicycle nearing the driveway flanked by the two massive spruce trees. This time he would go all the way to the house, and he would stay until she came out to tell him in person to get lost. Her father had told him, and her mother had told him to stop calling, but he had to hear it from Carolyn. She couldn't look at him and tell him to get lost, he kept telling himself, as he had been doing every day of the past week since he had been home. Every day he pedaled past her house, sometimes he even turned in at the driveway but never got more than a dozen yards before stopping, turning, leaving again. She knew where he was. If she had any feeling for him, any regrets, any hope of ever getting together again, she knew where to find him, he told himself bitterly those times when he turned and left. But not today.

He would make her say it to his face.

He saw the stranger enter and kept out of sight behind shrubs, pedaled around the side of the house and got off his bicycle to wait until she came out. She would sooner or later. Passing the French doors to the living room he glanced in and saw them, and the thunder that crashed was in his head. He stumbled back, away from the house blindly, groped for the handlebar of his bike and started walking home. He was weeping too hard to see to ride.

Two months later Carolyn and Stephen were married, and nine months later she bore their son.

PART TWO

The offices of Oracle Publications were no larger than they had been fifteen years earlier when Drake first entered them, but they looked bigger since there were no longer stacks of manuscripts piled to the ceiling. They no longer accepted unsolicited manuscripts, and that made the difference. Still cluttered, with too much going on in too small a space, like most New York offices, things were organized in a way that the three regulars understood and could cope with. Eddie Norwich had not been one of the regulars for the past four years; he had retired to Key West, where he had taken up scuba diving. His picture, a scrawny old man with a wide grin, was on the wall of his former office, now Drake's office.

That day in early June Drake was at his desk scanning a contract when Becky tapped on his door and entered.

For the first few years Becky had called him honey as often as not, but gradually she had dropped that, and now sometimes, especially in front of others, she even called him Mr. Symes. She took an interest in his diet, in his sleeping habits, the clothes he wore, the women he dated. She made no secret of wanting him married again and settled down with a good woman worthy of him.

"There's a woman to see you," she said. "Young and beautiful. She said to tell you Carolyn."

He did not knock over his chair when he leaped up, although Becky afterward claimed he did. With a smug expression she opened the door and moved aside, motioning to Carolyn to come on in. Then discreetly she left.

"You cut your hair," he said.

It had been long, bleached almost colorless every summer, then honey blond, now dark blond and short, a shiny cap framing her face. He had taken the few steps from his desk to within touching distance. She had not moved from the door. She was pale.

"You're married," he said.

"Divorced ten years ago. You're married?"

"Widower. She...overdose. Seven years ago." He swallowed hard, then said, "It's happened again. A cloud of pheromones, yours, mine, makes it hard to breathe."

Her purse dropped to the floor, then she was in his arms, and the cloud settled over them.

They went to his apartment. Subleased from Eddie Norwich, who had moved in when rent was cheap in the Village, it was large and airy, with a view of the Hudson River. And it was cluttered with manuscripts and books, galleys and illustrations....

They made frantic love, dozed, awoke, and made love again.

"We have so much to tell each other," she whispered.

He put his finger on her lips. "Later. Not here, not yet. You're more beautiful than you were before. How can that be?"

Later, in a neighborhood Greek restaurant, she said, "You first. You're a publisher? You own Oracle? Tell me about it."

"The usual story," he said. "Hard work, nose to the grindstone, twenty-hour days, luck, and marry the boss's daughter." He said it lightly, but there was an undercurrent of bitterness in his voice. After Donna's death by an overdose Eddie had confided in Drake: he had known for years that his daughter was an addict; they had tried therapy, clinics, rehab, everything, and then had hoped that marrying a good man whom she loved would do what nothing else had accomplished. He had apologized for not telling Drake before the wedding.

Carolyn put her hand on his on the table. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I shouldn't have married her in the first place, but you were married, with a family, and she wanted it. It was over before it began. Your turn."

"I married a stranger," she said. "The day he came, a day before my

birthday party, I was swimming and just threw a blanket around me to go answer the door. I had been thinking of you, and I was ovulating, and horny as hell. He said later that he never knew what happened, that he lost control, something he had never done before. I believe that. He's.... Well, he's not highly sexed, not like some people I know. I don't think it was rape exactly. I mean, I didn't put up a fight or resist or do anything else."

"That guy never knew what hit him," Drake said.

She smiled faintly. "I think that's right. Anyway, I got pregnant, and two months later we were married. He was a stranger. Then I had our son, Gary. He's a miracle, Drake. He's exceptionally bright, genius category. He's been accepted by Harvard already, and only fifteen. I said not this year. He has to wait until he's sixteen, at least."

She talked about her son, his precocity, his beauty, his decency, until Drake took her hand. "Enough. What about the father? You said divorced. You're still wearing a gold ring."

"Not his. I bought it myself. It's just a signal that I'm not looking, not available, something like that." Smiling, she took off the ring and put it in her purse.

The table was cleared, more coffee was brought, and she was remembering those terrible nine months. "You know the phrase twenty-four slash seven?" He nodded. "That was me with morning sickness. All day every day for nine months practically. By the time it was over Stephen had had it. So had I. You know, my parents always thought you were after me for the money someday."

Drake knew his disbelief showed. She smiled.

"Well, that's what they thought. But Stephen really was, and they never suspected. They had looked him up, and never even suspected that he had looked us up. He got the invitation from Mother for my birthday party and hightailed it to reference books, just couldn't believe an heiress was hot for his body. Anyway he quit the university and set himself up in a private research lab in Boston, computers or something, and I saw less and less of him. He couldn't stand being around when I was sick all the time, and then a baby, a small child getting in the way, making noise. It was too much for him. After five years I said enough. I haven't even seen him since the divorce, ten years now." She shrugged. "The story of my life, done."

"What's done is history," he said. "Prelude."

She nodded. "We've wasted an awful lot of time."

Days and nights blurred. She had to find an apartment for herself and Gary, who was in Middletown with his grandparents. The three of them were planning a tour, six weeks in Italy, Greece, France, while she located living space and got moved. "Gary's the first, maybe the only, thing I've ever done right, as far as they're concerned." In the fall Gary would take some classes at Columbia, and the following year he planned to enter Harvard.

"There's plenty of room in my place," Drake said when they talked about her plans. "For both of you."

She shook her head. "You and Gary have to get acquainted first."

He was annoyed at his own nervousness about that first meeting, and more annoyed at her amusement. He was afraid, he thought darkly, because if this didn't work out with him and her son, she would give one of them the boot, and it wouldn't be the kid. His worries were for nothing; Gary was a lanky fifteen-year-old, as curious about him as any boy his age would be with a new man in his mother's life. And to all appearances he was as eager to please Drake as Drake was to please him. They had gone to an Italian restaurant; Gary had eaten more than Drake and Carolyn combined, and judged it okay.

Then, with a quick look at Drake, he asked, "You know anything about mathematics?"

"Nope. You know anything about pyramidology?"

"Nope. Physics?"

"Nothing. The price of paper?"

They both laughed, and Carolyn gave Drake a smug I-told-you-so look.

Now Gary was on his way to Rome with his grandparents, and Carolyn sipped her wine and looked at her watch too often.

"His plane doesn't land until three in the morning our time," Drake reminded her. It was eleven o'clock.

"Sorry," she said. "You like him, don't you?"

"Very much."

"He thinks you're neat," she said.

Drake put his wine glass down and took her hand. They were in her apartment, with unopened cartons all around, not quite enough furniture yet. Over the next six weeks she would turn it into a home, but for now it was bleak and ugly.

Hesitantly she said, "You remember when you first got your job at Oracle, you lent me some books?"

He nodded.

"I made your handprints. Remember?"

"Yep. You used India ink. It didn't come off until the skin wore out and new skin grew."

Her smile was rueful. "I know. I'm better at it now."

For a moment he didn't speak or even move, then he said, "What does that mean?"

"Something happened that day in Dad's house, something inexplicable, and it terrified me. People said this and they said that; I saw a counselor for a while, but nothing helped. You were associated with it somehow and I had to avoid you. Your reaction was normal: bewilderment, wonder, maybe some fear, nothing like what I was going through, and I couldn't explain it. You were able to put it aside as one of those things that can't be understood, can't be explained or examined, and has to be abandoned. I think we encounter things like that a lot, and we simply put them aside and even forget them to preserve our consensual reality."

He released her hand and picked up his wine glass. "I deal with nuts and their theories on a day-by-day basis," he said. "You know, aliens from the Dog Star colonizing Earth; out-of-body experiences; back from death; ectoplasmic manifestations; tea leaves; the Tao of personal salvation.... Those who aren't out-and-out crooks and charlatans believe in their personal interpretation of reality. They can't all be right. How do you pick and choose among them? What's to choose? And after you've chosen which one to believe, what do you have that the rest of humanity doesn't have?"

"Maybe they're all right but incomplete," she said slowly. "Maybe they're all trying to explain a tiny bit of a different reality that the rest of humanity is denying and forgetting. Maybe some of those nut theories are

on a par with early theories that denied other generally accepted beliefs, like witches caused the Black Death, or night vapors caused malaria, or meteorites were thrown by pranksters, because everyone knew there weren't any stones in the sky."

Grinning, he said, "You win." He was thinking of one of his writers who made a good case that all those things might have been true at one time, that since the past was in a state of flux, malleable, we had no way of knowing what had been true before, what was true now. The plastic past.

"Getting back to my autobiography, part two," she said. "When I was at Radcliffe a few of us went to a palmist, and she told me some amazing things, enough so that I looked her up, read her books, read a lot of other books, and the next year I went back and became her student. I learned to read hands. I'm pretty good at it."

"You mean you do it for people?" he asked cautiously.

"Well, sure. Mostly I work with Zelda. She does two kinds of readings, a quick and easy once-over just looking at the hand itself, and an in-depth reading where she uses handprints. I often read the handprints for her. And for a few other palmists," she added, smiling at the look of disbelief he didn't hide quickly enough.

He rubbed his hand over his face, as if wiping off a spider web. "I don't care what it means if it got you over your fear, let us get together again."

"Let me bring it up to date," she said in a low voice. "Last winter I came across those handprints of yours. I'll show you in a little while. And I was back there again, panicked again. Seventeen years down the drain, the terror still there...I really thought I was losing my mind altogether."

She closed her eyes, remembering that evening. She had stood staring at his handprints, shaking, and with startling immediacy she had recalled something else Zelda said the first time she examined her hand. "You lead a double life, and will for many years to come. In your thirties you will find love again with a man. Seize it, child. For five or six years there is great happiness in store for you."

"Then what?" Carolyn had asked.

"After that I can't tell. See the many lines radiating out after the break here? I don't know what that means."

Carolyn told Drake, then said, "Zelda said my hand revealed years of

experiences that I hadn't had, but that would come because they had come. They were revealed in the minor hand, not yet manifest in the major hand. Your fingerprints don't change, but other lines do, when potential is realized, or something happens to change your life. A lot of things can affect the lines," she said. "And I completely forgot all of that until the night I picked up your handprints for the first time probably in seventeen years."

"They just happened to be lying around," he said skeptically.

"No. I'll show you. In at the table."

They went to the dinette table that separated the living room from the kitchen, and she opened an expanding file folder. Carefully she removed a glassine envelope, then shook out other objects. Polaroid pictures, a ring, a dried flower in its own envelope....

She picked up the ring and slipped it on. "It turned my finger green," she said, taking it off again.

"You saved all that stuff all those years?"

"As you see. I threw away the bugs."

They both laughed. Once when they had fallen out of love, he had given her a box of beetles and grubs.

"These are your prints," she said, taking several sheets of paper from the glassine envelope. "Remember, I had to do your hands more than once because I kept smearing them? These are the good ones." She picked up an ivory stylus and began to point to the lines as she explained the heart line, the head line, the life line....

"See the break? All three lines have it at the same time, a major break in your life when you were about twenty. There's the double line, a double life indicated, then the attachment again when you are in your thirties, just like mine. And the break about five years later. Then chaos, radiating lines, just like mine."

It meant nothing to him, and she knew it; his body language was eloquent, but she continued. She got her own hand prints and compared them. Although he had to admit that the lines were similar, for all he knew all hands had those same breaks and double lines and stars and hash marks....

"You're not really reading my hand," he said after a few minutes.

"Of course not. I know you too well. I'm simply showing you the similarities."

"And that explains anything? The fear you kept feeling? The reason we're together again?"

She began to gather up the handprints, to return them to the envelope. "When I saw that we were bound together, I stopped being so afraid, and I began to plot out the next few months. And here we are."

He was relieved to see the prints being put away, and accepted her too-facile conclusion without question, wanting to believe.

"But one more favor," she said. "I want to make prints of your hands now. Do you mind?"

"Ah ha!" he said. "We bargain. You make the prints and then we go to bed. Deal?"

Involuntarily she looked at her watch.

"You don't have to stay in bed," he said. "No tie-down job tonight."

"Idiot. Okay. Deal. But you do have to stay in bed, and don't wake me up in the morning when you leave. Is that a deal?"

It was.

Much later she sat at the table and studied his current handprints, and then closed her eyes and leaned back thinking of what she had not told him, sensing that he had heard quite enough for one evening. There was a third set of prints with that same break, that same eruption of lines into chaos. Gary's handprints. Normal, predictable lines, then chaos when he was about twenty, five years in the future.

Over the years she had read thousands of handprints; she had seen the breaks of illness, loss, death, accidents, sometimes followed by healing and happiness, often not, but always lines with meaning that could be understood even if poorly. She never had seen what she had come to call the fan of indeterminacy, that chaotic multi-branched cluster on her own hand and on those of the two people she loved.

The fear was back, pounding at her eyelids, thundering in her pulse.

PART THREE

It had worked out, Drake sometimes thought in wonder. The wasted years were fading from memory, a bad dream to be put aside as quickly as possible, and what they had now was the life that had been meant for them from the first. Even the anticipated problems with Gary had evaporated

and it was difficult to recall what they had done to form a friendship, then a close relationship that wasn't quite father/son, but near enough.

He put down a manuscript with a sigh, and Carolyn glanced up from her own work. Fitting, he thought; he read nut books, she read hands, but was one any screwier than the other? Over the years, to his amazement, he had not grown more and more cynical about his writers and their nutty theories, as he had seen happen with Eddie Norwich, but more sympathetic and fonder of them.

"Soul catchers," he said to Carolyn. She nodded, then turned back to her handprints.

All she demanded of the theorists, he mused, was their sincerity, their belief in their systems. And, surprisingly, Gary had taken that position also. "We're all doing the same thing," he had said once. "The astronomers, physicists, mathematicians, philosophers, palmists, tea-leaf readers, we're all looking for the answers to the same riddle, the meaning of existence. Some of us use math and physics, rigorous scientific theories and experiments; others use intuition and rituals, but the search is the same. We all know there's more than meets the eye out there."

"Tell her dad that," Drake had said. They all laughed.

Her father had come to accept that divorce in her case was all right; after all, the man had robbed her of nearly two million dollars! A life of virtuous celibacy had been all right, penance for past sins of the flesh. Of course, remarriage for a Catholic was out of the question, and that was all right. Then Drake had come into her life again, had led her into a life of sin. Drake with his heretical books, pagan books, occultism, devil worship.

Watching her, sometimes he found himself afraid to close his eyes, afraid that in the moment it took to blink, when he opened his eyes she would not be there. The moments of panic had happened often at first, and now came over him with such infrequency that when one hit, it took him by surprise, and he had little defense. Deliberately then, he closed his eyes, counted to three, and opened them to watch her reach out and turn on her halogen lamp. He smiled to himself and picked up another manuscript.

The phone rang. She got up to listen to the incoming message; when she heard Gary's voice, she answered.

"Hi, honey," she said. "What's up?" It was ten-thirty, late for him to be calling.

"Mother, I took Stephen to the hospital this evening. He collapsed at the lab, and I took him. He...he wants to see you, as soon as you can get up here. Tomorrow."

Stroke, she thought. Heart attack. "How bad is he?"

"They're doing tests; there will be more in the morning. It's bad. They don't know what's wrong."

"Gary, what's the point? I'm sorry, but —"

"Mother! Please. He has to see you before.... He might die. It's that bad."

She heard the strain in his voice, the tension, and she thought: *Oh, God, the five years are up.*

THEY FLEW FROM LaGuardia to Logan and took a taxi to the hospital where Gary met them. He looked as if he had not slept in days, and he looked frightened. He was a handsome young man, as blond as Carolyn had been at twenty, with wide shoulders and a squared body inherited from his father.

"I'll wait," Drake said. He glanced at the lobby with potted plants and a constant stream of coming and going patients, visitors, nurses, doctors. "I'll find the coffee shop and wait there."

They had known that Gary was working with Stephen, that after years of regarding his son as a hindrance, suddenly Stephen had found a use for him. Gary had said with a shrug that it was well-known that mathematics prodigies peaked in their twenties or earlier, and Stephen was aware of that too. But he had gone to work with him, excited by whatever it was that Stephen was involved in. Drake watched Gary and Carolyn enter an elevator, then turned to find his way to the coffee shop.

They got off on the ninth floor and Gary led her through a maze of corridors to the Neurology unit, where he stopped near a water fountain. "Let's talk a minute," he said, glancing up and down the corridor, at the nurses, patients, visitors, all going about their business.

"He's in restraints," he said. "He's on heavy duty muscle relaxants, but when it starts to wear off he thrashes about uncontrollably. It's hard for him to speak, but he knows what he wants to say; he isn't deranged. He knows."

They walked again, past the nurses' station, up to a man reading a magazine in a small alcove. "This is my mother," Gary said to him. The man looked her over and nodded.

They went to a nearby door and entered. A male nurse rose from a chair, and Gary said, "My mother." The man looked her over the same way the other one had done, nodded, and left them with Stephen. Tubes, needles in both hands connected to intravenous solutions, electrodes on his head, a wide band over his forehead keeping his head in place, restraints on both arms.... His eyes were closed until Gary said his name. His eyelids fluttered, opened, closed, then opened again, but apparently he could not keep them focused, and he closed them once more.

"Caro — " On the monitor above his bed, the lines jumped erratically. "Carolyn. One-way trip. It's yours, my — "

It was excruciating to listen to him, try to piece together what he was uttering, broken words, broken phrases, nonsensical words. Straining to understand, she put her hand on his arm, felt the muscles twitching, spasming, and jerked back. Then a doctor entered the room and motioned her away from the bed.

"I'm sorry," he said briskly. "He needs to rest. Will you be in town? We'll get in touch if there's any change." He ushered her to the door as he spoke.

She pulled away from his hand on her arm and turned back toward the bed. Stephen's eyes were open again, wild eyes, shifting randomly. "I'm sorry, Stephen. I'll come back."

They had taken a few steps from the door when another man met her and Gary, and this time Gary introduced him. "Mother, this is Mr. Beekman. He's an associate of Stephen's."

"I won't intrude," Beekman said. "I wanted to extend my deepest sympathy at this time. I'm afraid the doctors have not made a diagnosis, or prognosis, but if there's any change, we will be in touch immediately. Dr. Yost felt a great need to see you, to tell you that you are his beneficiary in the event that he succumbs to this tragic occurrence. Our company is doing everything possible. If there is anything at all we can do to assist you, please don't hesitate to let us know. Gary has my personal number and he will be on hand during this emergency."

He bowed slightly, turned and joined the doctor at the door to Stephen's room.

"Who is that man? What's going on here?" Carolyn whispered as she and Gary walked back to the elevator.

"Later," he said. "Go check in and I'll join you at the hotel in an hour or two. I want to try to see the results of the MRI they did this morning."

In silence they rode the elevator down, then followed signs to the coffee shop, where Drake took one look at Carolyn, stood up and put his arm around her shoulders. Gary walked to the outer doors with them and hugged his mother, then hugged Drake. "Don't let on," he whispered in Drake's ear. "I put a tape cassette in your pocket. Don't crush it." Aloud he said, "I'll come around as soon as I can."

Drake went out and bought a tape player and they listened to Stephen's ramblings: garbled, incomprehensible, turning to noise, stopping, starting again. When Carolyn reached out to replay it Drake put his hand on hers.

"Let's wait for Gary. Maybe he knows what it all means."

She paced the minisuite, feeling it change from rather handsome hotel rooms to a cage. Then Gary arrived.

He looked more haggard, more frightened than he had earlier, and clearly he was exhausted.

"Just coffee," he said when Drake asked if he wanted anything. He looked as if he had been riding a caffeine high for days. Drake called for another pot of coffee.

Carolyn sat in an armchair near Gary and leaned forward. "What is this all about? What is that tape all about? Who are those men at the hospital? What's wrong with Stephen?"

Gary closed his eyes a moment, then with an apparent effort sat up straighter. "You played the tape?" When she nodded, he said, "Let's play it again and I'll jot down the phrases and explain."

They played it and he made notes of the words that were understandable. The coffee arrived and they were all silent until the bellboy had left.

Gary did not pick up the notebook he had written in yet, but said, "Two years ago Stephen got in touch with me. You know we saw each other now and then for lunch or a quick dinner, never more than that. We met for dinner, and I thought it would be more of the same, a hurried meal, not much to say to each other, done. But he had a lot on his mind, and we

spent hours talking. He knew about me, the paper Carmichael published giving me credit, all that. He wasn't after a long neglected son; he wanted my brain," he said in a matter-of-fact way.

"Everyone assumed that he was researching artificial intelligence, something to do with computers. He's encouraged people to believe that for years. That night he told me what he really had spent the past twenty-five years working on: the transference of digitized matter through spatial and temporal dimensions." He grinned a crooked grin. "Time travel," he said.

Drake made an explosive sound without words, and Gary nodded. "That was my reaction," he said.

Carolyn did not move or make any noise at all; she felt the clutch of fear spread through her like a paralytic drug.

"He took me to the lab and showed me the equipment, and showed me what he was doing with it. He drugged a mouse and confined it in a small mesh bag so it wouldn't escape when it got there. Wherever there was. The mouse disappeared. I was hooked," he said.

Drake stood up, walked to the window and gazed out, seeing little of the scene twelve stories down.

"You know how the generation of kids accepted space travel back in the fifties and sixties, just accepted that sure it would happen," Gary said. "Adults got all spooked and excited, but the kids didn't. They had grown up with the idea of space travel — movies, comic books, science fiction stories. It was just *when* in doubt, not that it would begin. My generation is something like that with time travel. And if it wasn't time travel I saw that night, it was something magical. The mouse vanished. It went somewhere." He poured coffee. His hands were shaking.

"The problem was that he could send things somewhere, but they weren't coming back," he said after a moment. "We spent months reviewing every step of his work, changing a few things here and there. Making computer models. A year ago a mouse did come back. It took food and water, seemed perfectly all right, then had a massive seizure and died two hours later. A monkey lasted nearly twenty-four hours before it showed the same symptoms and died."

"He tried it on himself," Carolyn whispered. "Oh, my God!"

"He had to," Gary said. "He said he had to know when the damage

occurred, the trip out, or coming back. He had to know if the coordinates worked. He had to know and the animals couldn't tell him."

Drake swung away from the window. "Christ! You knew what he was doing? You helped him? Why? Why now? Why not find the glitch and fix it first?"

"Yes. I knew and assisted him. Last week we had a long talk. Do you know anything about the GloBall Corporation?"

Drake shook his head. "I never even heard of it."

"That's how they want it," Gary said. He sounded more and more tired as he spoke. "After Stephen set up his lab, using your money," he said to Carolyn, "he got a backer for the first time. Money attracts more money, I guess. And over the years there have been others let in on it. They call themselves the GloBall Corporation. There are six of them, six powerful, wealthy men who have seen the future and liked what they saw. This is right up your alley, Drake. You see, they'll own the world. They've been obliterating their own history; you won't find a single one of them with a firm date and place attached to him, including Stephen. No assassin will go back to year x and rub out Mr. Beekman; he won't be where the record says he was. They will take over businesses, buy stocks in 1950, become billionaires tomorrow. There won't be any way to stop them or control them because they'll own the past and no one will know that."

"This is insane!" Carolyn cried. "Haven't they seen Stephen? He's dying! Whatever he's done, it's killing him! They know that! A secret cabal to take over the world? They must know that they'll be dead too if they try it! I don't believe any of this!"

"They'll send bright young people to do their bidding for now," Gary said tiredly. "They'll instruct them in exactly what they want done, make sure they have the means to do it, then bring them back and give them the best of care when they start dying. On to the next eager young person. Eventually they'll find out why they die. Offer enough money, people will do what you want. Lie to them, promise them the Moon, they'll believe anything.... And meanwhile work on the problem. Stephen and I believe he was all right until he was brought back. It's a one-way trip for now."

"They'll send people they trust back to various periods, let them get established, knowing they'll have to stay in the past, knowing they will

be extremely wealthy, each one paving the way for the next. It's a trade-off. They will get GloBall rolling."

Suddenly Carolyn jumped up. She looked about the room wildly, then went to the minibar, unlocked it, and yanked out a bottle. "I don't believe a word of this," she said, fumbling with the bottle to get it open. "It's insane! He's crazy and he's made you crazy."

Gary picked up his notebook. "I know what some of these things mean. 'Pay back.' He wrote his will a couple of years ago, named you as beneficiary. He never intended to rob you, but he couldn't help himself, he was under a compulsion he couldn't resist to carry on his research. You'll be a major shareholder in GloBall. 'Sea of blood.' The carpet in Grandfather's house. He found himself with his face pressed against it and thought it was blood at first."

Carolyn dropped the bottle still unopened, and wheeled around. "What are you talking about? I never told him or anyone else about that!" She looked at Drake wildly; he shook his head. He had never mentioned that day to anyone. She swayed and Drake caught her arm, steadied her. In her head she heard her own voice: "He was getting up! He looked at me and was getting up. Then he disappeared! He looked at me and got up, and then he disappeared." She would have fallen if Drake hadn't held her.

"That was him," she said hoarsely. "Oh, God, that was him. Twenty-two years ago!"

"Four days ago," Gary said.

DRAKE AND CAROLYN sat together on the couch holding drinks, and Gary moved about the room restlessly. "No booze. It would knock me out probably. Let me finish," he said. "Four days ago Stephen put in the coordinates. He thought the house would be empty, Grandfather at the clinic, you and Grandmother not yet home from France. He had the date wrong. You and Drake saw him. He found himself on the red carpet, dazed, but normal. When he got back to the cage at the lab he said it felt as if a bolt of lightning had gone through his head. He knew immediately that he had been hurt, just like the animals. We worked for two days straight trying to find out why. Then he said he wanted to get some air, and we left the building and sat on a bench. He said we had to stop them before

he died, or there would be no stopping them at all.

"They have copies of all his data, his research notes, everything from the beginning in safe places scattered all over the country. With all that data, when he dies others can pick up where he left off. The only way to stop the machine is to prevent its starting, he said. He was crying."

Gary paused with his back to them, facing the window. "He isn't evil, and he was never after power. He had a compulsion to find out if he could do this. He got a glimpse of something so miraculous he couldn't resist following through, but then he saw what it would lead to. Never mind," he said brusquely, and started his restless roaming again.

"He said Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease was the nearest he knew to describe it, but it wasn't that. He had ruled out suicide, not here and now, but before his data meant anything, before he set up his own lab, while it was still the scribbling of a mad physicist. He said I had to help him, and I agreed."

"You could go back and destroy his data," Drake said harshly. "Burn his notes, even cripple him if you have to."

Gary sat down and shook his head. "You don't understand. He would just start over because he knew he could do this and he had to do it. And eventually it would lead to exactly where he is now. He called it assisted suicide," he said hoarsely. "And it has to happen someplace where we know a weapon will be available. I can't take anything with me, and he, as a young man, will not be easy to kill unless I use a gun."

Drake could feel waves of ice from Carolyn's hand flowing into him, stilling him the way she was stilled, an ice sculpture next to him on the sofa. The old paradox: would the laws of the universe permit one to kill one's grandfather? He yanked his hand free and rubbed his face. "There's something else happening here, not what you believe. That isn't the only solution!"

"Do you want mathematical proof?" Gary said harshly.

Carolyn, seeing in her mind's eye Stephen rising, facing her, his expression of triumph, of mastery, said quietly, "Just tell us."

Gary's voice was monotone, his head lowered when he continued. "We won't have much time. There will be a power drain, and people at GloBall will know someone is using the equipment without authorization. If they think to cut the power, God only knows where I'll be, in what

shape. So it has to be fast and sure." He looked up at Carolyn. "Grandfather's house. The spatial coordinates are already in place. No one's touched the equipment since.... That's why he made the test using that house, just to make certain he could get there, that long ago. There's a loaded gun in the study, Grandfather's clothes upstairs for me to use afterward. It's the only place and time that Stephen knows exactly where he was that long ago: Grandfather's house, two in the afternoon, the day before your twenty-first birthday." He glanced at her, away quickly. "He...he told me about that day, all of it."

Carolyn moaned. Drake took her ice hand again. "What about you?" he asked Gary. "You won't come back to this time, will you? You can't. It won't exist." His thoughts spun faster and faster. He would have to wait until after Stephen raped Carolyn, after his own conception. And he would exist full-grown and as a developing embryo, a developing fetus, a baby.... Drake shook his head hard, unable to accept it, even to grasp it. With a sense of finality, the thought came: he, Drake, would lose her again. Her parents would take her away, keep her and her illegitimate child far away. None of the other implications held any importance at the moment; he would lose her again, that was what mattered. He wanted to scream.

Gary was watching him fixedly, as if aware of the hellish thoughts racing through his mind. "That's right," Gary said. "One-way trip." He looked at Carolyn and said softly, "You have to do it, Mother. What he would have done if he hadn't collapsed too soon."

Carolyn moaned, shaking her head. "No. No! No! There's something else. Another way!"

"There isn't another way," Gary said. "He's dying. Tonight, tomorrow.... They're already considering scientists to take over where he left off. They'll wait until he's dead — this is data, how long, what symptoms.... But when he's gone, I probably won't ever be in the lab alone again." He jumped up and walked jerkily to the window, leaned his forehead against it. "Later, anything I might do, they'll be able to undo. We sat on the bench because he couldn't walk farther. Then he said it's time, let's get it over with, and we started back in. He didn't make it to the lab. Beekman was there, and a couple of the others. He could talk. He told them he wanted to see you, Mother. He said he wants me to show you what your money bought, the lab, the building, grounds. They agreed.

They aren't afraid of you, a fortuneteller. They promised him I could take you on a tour."

Carolyn shuddered and moaned, "No, no, no, no."

Inexorably Gary continued, "After this is over, after Stephen's dead, they'll undo the will. They can't have an outsider a major shareholder. And if they undo the will, they'll have to undo me, nullify me one way or another. We're not part of the package, neither of us is."

Another rippling shudder passed through Carolyn.

"Not her," Drake said, holding her ice hand. "I'll go with you. Not her."

"You can't. They wouldn't let you in, but she can have her tour."

"Then what?" Drake demanded. "You stop the machine before it's even built, but then what? What happens here and now?"

"It will be like switching tracks," Gary said. "You're on track nine, there will be a blip, and you'll both be on track four, back on the day before her twenty-first birthday. I'll be there, too. The world will notice or not."

And every time they altered what had been, it would be like that, Drake understood; the world would feel a blip, or not, and memories would be expunged.... Events, births, deaths, happenings undone. He thought of all the nut-books he had read, edited, published, written by people who believed they had glimpsed a different reality, a bit of the truth of the universe, one not acknowledged, not verifiable by any objective means. Who could say they weren't already doing it, altering the past, a blip here, there, a scrap of memory retained here, there...?

Gary talked as he drove to the GloBall complex: Stephen had put in the spatial coordinates, he said, and he, Gary, had worked the previous night to arrive at the temporal coordinates. It had to be done at exactly six o'clock or the timing would be off.

Carolyn stopped listening, thinking instead of the mothers who had seen their sons sent off to Australia, and rejoiced because that was better than having them die in prison. Or watched their sons depart for America, rejoicing because that was better than starving in Europe. He would be out of her life. But alive. That was the important thing, he would be alive and safe. He said she would forget all this, as if it had not happened, and she did not believe him. Forget her child?

Gary parked at the curb outside the fenced GloBall complex. They got out of the car, and for a moment Drake looked at Carolyn, then he pulled her to him and held her hard, his eyes closed. She drew away and Gary embraced Drake. No one spoke. Drake had said he would wait in the car, and Gary had smiled his crooked smile. It wouldn't matter where he waited, Drake understood, or even if he waited. Watching them walk away, he thought of the handprints Carolyn had made, a double life, five years of happiness, chaos. His eyes blurred and he started to get back in the car, then turned and walked blindly instead. It would not matter where he was when it happened. If it happened, he told himself. If. If...if...if if if.... He stumbled over something he didn't see, caught his balance and kept walking.

 CAROLYN WALKED numbly at Gary's side past security, through a lobby, offices, a lounge. It was all expensive, and very quiet. The day people had left; a few others were about, but they treated her and Gary with deference and kept out of the way. "Where we did the real work," Gary said finally, opening a door with a computer key. Banks of computers, desks, a pedestal with what could have been a stainless steel telephone booth on it. What had he called it? The cage. Tears felt like acid in her eyes. "This is where he was always the happiest," Gary was saying, ignoring her tears. He started keying in something at a computer, talking, and she understood that others probably were listening.

He had told her exactly what she had to do: hold down one key until a red light turned green, then depress a second key until the light went out.

Talking, he stripped off his clothes and tossed them down. He had explained that: every bit of matter had to be digitized, no excess allowed.

"He wanted to show you everything himself. He hated that you thought he had robbed you for nothing." It was a minute before six. He stepped onto the pedestal and pressed a button; a door slid open, and he looked at her for a moment, then entered the cage and the door closed. She put her finger on the first key.

"Gary, open the door," a voice said. She jerked her hand from the key, startled. "You locked the door by mistake, Gary. Set off alarms like crazy. Open up."

Twenty-five seconds, twenty-four....

"Gary! This isn't funny. Open the damn door!"

Eighteen seconds, seventeen....

"Open the fucking door!"

The door handle was moving when she pressed the first key. The red light came on. The door swung open and several men crowded through the doorway.

"Get away from there! Back up!"

The light turned green and she pressed the second key.

One of the men aimed a gun at her and yelled something. She held the key down and bowed her head, then the world exploded.

Carolyn got out of the pool when the thunder crashed. For a moment it felt as if it was in her, all around her, but no, it was still distant. Another stormy afternoon was coming, she thought as she wrapped a beach blanket about herself and went back inside the house. The doorbell was ringing.

When Stephen Yost began to force her back into the living room she felt removed, at a great distance. She offered no resistance, but watched herself, watched him, listened to his incoherent words, she felt almost as if it had to happen this way, almost as if she had planned it.

When the thunder rumbled, Drake was on his bicycle entering the driveway.... He no longer even knew what they had quarreled about this time, only that it had to end. If she told him to his face that it was over, really over, he would leave her alone, he promised himself. She had to say it to his face, not her father, or her mother. He pedaled around the house. People were setting up tables, getting the garden ready for her party. As he drew near the French windows, he saw a man toss a blanket on the floor, saw him yank off Carolyn's bikini top and start to pull at the bottom strip of fabric. Beyond them a naked man appeared in the doorway holding a gun. He stepped back out of sight.

Drake banged on the glass door, tried to open it. The naked man returned and this time he looked at Drake and for a moment he looked panicked. He made a sound that didn't carry to Drake, but Carolyn and her assailant whirled around and apparently became aware of him for the first time. They stared at the naked man, who looked young and very frightened. Drake banged on the door again, yelled, and the gun wavered. The

man steadied it with both hands and took a step forward. Drake picked up his bicycle and swung it hard at the glass, and when the panes shattered he dove through.

Stephen pushed Carolyn aside when the naked man stepped into the room. "Put that gun down! Are you crazy!" The man took another step, holding the gun in both hands now. The French door shattered and glass flew into the room. Stephen dropped to the floor with blood spurting from his neck; a shard of glass in his throat tottered for a moment, fell, but he clutched at his throat, making inhuman sounds that were cut off abruptly. The man with the gun stopped moving when Stephen collapsed, then he disappeared.

Carolyn screamed again and again, until Drake took her by the shoulders and shook her, then held her hard against him. His arm and leg were bleeding profusely; his blood ran down her bare back.

Yard workers ran in, and someone called nine one one.

"You don't need to feel guilty," the investigating officer said. "It's enough that Yost was going to rape her. He must have been crazy, not stopping when you banged on the door. You didn't mean to kill the son of a bitch. It happened, that's all. You feeling okay?"

Dr. Harley, Carolyn's father, had stitched his arm and bandaged his leg; she was sedated, sleeping, and Drake felt like hell. He nodded. "Okay."

The Harleys insisted that he stay in the guest room that night. Dr. Harley gave him two sleeping pills and advised him to use them; he would be in a certain amount of pain, still in shock, might as well try to get some sleep. He called Drake son.

Holding the pills, Drake sat at his window, his arm throbbing, and he said softly to himself, "He did stop. He pushed her away. They both saw something that made him stop." But already he was starting to doubt, starting to rationalize it.

Down the hall from the guest room, in her own bed, Carolyn was fighting her way through layers of dope-induced fog, fighting a nightmare that involved a naked man with a gun. She had been to a palmist once, and now, strangely, Madam Zelda's voice was in her head: "All those lines on

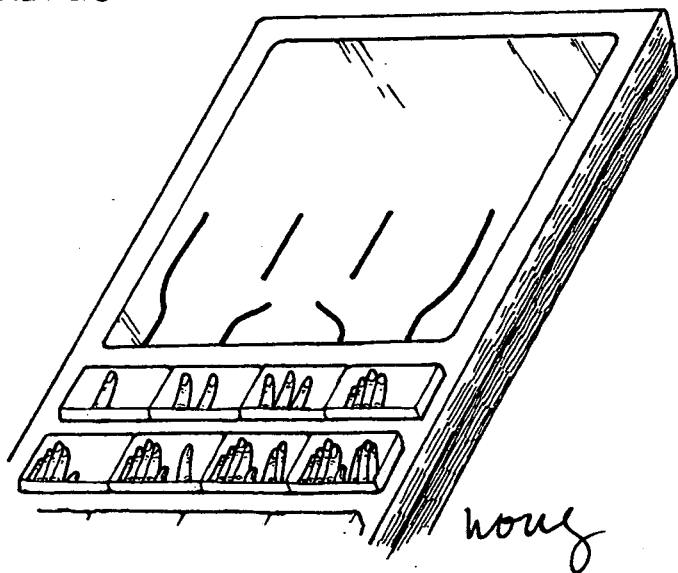
the minor hand, an old hand with many experiences that may show up eventually on the major hand, or perhaps not. But the body knows and remembers. Sometimes it can communicate what it knows, sometimes not, or just give a glimpse, a fleeting impression, like something not quite remembered."

The living room had become a sea of blood, she thought, and began to shake as if with a deep chill.

"A great loss here, pain and heartache, see the break in the life line, the heart line, and the head line." That was wrong, she thought, confused. She had been spared. Drake had saved her. There was no loss, no pain or heartache.

She began to weep, and could not have said why. ☞

SPECULATIONS **RAMPANT**
INNUMERACY WILL FORCE A CALCULATOR
REDESIGN...





BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

Dreams of the Compass Rose,
by Vera Nazarian, Wildside Press,
2002, \$39.95.

I LOVE coming upon a novel by an unfamiliar (to me) author that's as good as the one in hand — though to be honest, I had read Nazarian's on-line short story "Rossia Moya" a year or so ago. But *Dreams of the Compass Rose* has nothing in common with that story in terms of style or subject matter — only in the assurance with which the author tells a story and brings her complex characters to life. And while I remember liking the story a great deal, I love this book.

Dreams of the Compass Rose is a story-cycle in which we keep coming back to the same characters, except from different viewpoints and different times in their lives. It's set in a land of desert empires that never was, though it could easily be our world — far in

the future, or deep in the past. Some of the stories are brutal, some are like dreams. All of them are engaging and resonant, creating a new mythology that feels so right one might be forgiven for thinking that it's the cultural heritage of some forgotten country or people that have been lost to history.

It reminded me of those wonderful, dream-laden story-cycles that Clark Ashton Smith and Lord Dunsany were writing around the turn of the last century. *Dreams of the Compass Rose* has a similar stately lyricism, a compelling and visionary voice that speaks to the heart of the reader.

My reading time is very limited these days, but I know this is a book I will return to again and again.

If your local bookstore can't get it for you, you can order it directly from Wildside Press at P.O. Box 45, Gillette, NJ 07933-0045, or from their website at www.wildsidepress.com.

Aquamarine, by Alice Hoffman, Scholastic Press, 2001, \$16.95.

It's the end of the summer and the Capri Beach Club, pretty much deserted all summer except for best friends Hailey and Claire, is slated for demolition in a week's time. That's also when Claire, having lived next door to Hailey forever, moves away with her grandparents.

The girls spend their days at the Capri, praying for time to not just slow down, but to stop, because they're not ready for their world to change. But time always moves on and it takes a small miracle to allow the girls to emerge unscathed from the upcoming traumas they must face.

This is a sweet and wise fable, contemporary and timeless. Hoffman breathes full life into her characters; her prose is simple but gorgeous, and she reveals for us here, in this little tale meant for younger readers, the same keen insights into what makes people tick as she does in her adult fiction. In fact, this is a fairy tale for all ages and I recommend it highly.

Coolhunting, by Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Fictionwise.com, 2001, \$2.33.

This reprint from a 1998 issue of *Science Fiction Age* is certainly worth a second look in e-book format.

Steffie Storm-Warning is a nomadic NYC coolhunter in the near future. Coolhunters chase down the next cool thing before it happens, earning their living by their skill at advance-guessing the marketplace. Steffie's one of the best, but she wasn't always a coolhunter. Once she was Stephanie Wyton-Brew of Ann Arbor and she was part of a family that included her older sister KD, trapped in the body of a three-year-old girl through a medical procedure imposed upon her by her parents who wanted one of their offspring to be a child forever.

Called back to her family home with the news that KD is dying, Steffie gets caught up in a new moral dilemma and the same unhappy family dynamics that made her run away from home on the night before she graduated from high school.

This is a fascinating and thought-provoking novella and perfectly exemplifies one of the reasons that I enjoy Rusch's writing as much as I do. Her stories often unfold with a breezy, entertaining flow, leading one to expect something fuzzy and warm. Except at its heart, her fiction has a deep emotional edge that, while it might

seem at odds with the storytelling style, turns out to be perfectly suited to it, paying off her readers with rich dividends.

The Man Who Grew Young, by Daniel Quinn, Context Books, 2001, \$19.95.

There's a wonderful premise that drives this illustrated story: what if at the end of time, the universe turns around and everything that has already happened, happens again, only in reverse? A person's life would begin when they're taken out of their grave and ends when they return to their mother's womb. Memory would work the same way. You would remember when you died because it was like being born, but the journey to the womb would be a mystery.

It's like that for everyone, except Adam Taylor — the Everyman through whom Daniel Quinn has chosen to tell his story. To quote the cover copy (because it lays it out so succinctly):

"To [Taylor's] own amazement and frustration, he seems to be a man *without* a mother — and therefore immortal. He makes friends, takes wives, and watches them 'grow' into adolescence, childhood,

and infancy, leaving him behind, decade after decade, century after century."

Taylor's quest takes him to the beginning of time and Quinn plays fair with the story. By the time you get to the end, it's very obvious, but you can't fault Quinn for that, because how else could the story end? And it's the journey that's so fascinating. Not to mention all the wonderful touches of what it would be like to live backward. For instance, artists believe that "every painting and every sculpture must absolutely end in the hand of some man or woman and be seen no more." Or the dismantling of Stonehenge.

The whole idea is so interesting that I wonder why it hasn't been used before. (Although maybe it has and I've simply never seen it.) In his introduction, Quinn calls it an impossible novel, one that could only work in this illustrated format, but I have to disagree. Writing it in a traditional style would have added depth to the characterization. Plus, in prose we would get to cast the "movie" and see it unfold in our own heads.

When it comes to illustrated work such as this, a reader's appreciation is very much dependent upon the artist's interpretation. If it

doesn't mesh with your vision, it won't work for you.

In this case, Tim Eldred, while certainly a fine artist, has too cartoony a style for my tastes — at least for this particular story. I would have preferred either an artist more rooted in the fine arts, or one with a more experimental style — to fit the boldness of the storyline.

But with that said, I still enjoyed the experience and recommend it to you for the freshness of the premise and for how Quinn plays out all the speculations of such a turned-around manner of living.

Pioneer, by Melanie Tem, Wormhole Books, 2001, \$12.

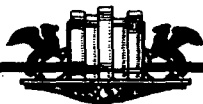
A Sad Last Love at the Diner of the Damned, by Edward Bryant, Wormhole Books, 2001, \$12.

Speaking of specialty presses (I was in last issue's column), here's a new one: Wormhole Books, which says that it's an on-line bookseller, a writing community, and a specialty press concentrating on high-quality chapbooks. I haven't visited their site (www.wormholebooks.com), so I can't comment on the first two claims, but they've certainly started off their chapbook line with a bang.

The Tem is an original, an sf story centered around an expedition exploring new planets to see if they can sustain human life. But while the science is fine (at least it seems so through these uneducated eyes), it's with her characters that Tem shines. What brought them to join the expedition, how they relate to each other and the new environment — it's a wonderful exercise in exploring what makes us tick, delivered in her usual fine prose.

Bryant's is a reprint, a twisted story of zombies in a small town that originally appeared in *Book of the Dead*, a prose sequel to George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* movies. In the afterword, Bryant tells us that he even appalled himself in writing this piece. It's unquestionably a strong, gruesome story, and it certainly makes its point about the insular communities in small towns and the strength of the human spirit when confronted with impossible adversity. But I don't recommend it to the weak-hearted.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. ☞



BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

Dhalgren, by Samuel R. Delany, Vintage, 2001, \$18.

Turbulence: A Log Book, by Henrick Drescher, Chronicle, 2001, \$22.95.

HERE IS A message in a bottle, written in the days following the attack on the World Trade Center and flash-forwarded a few months to the end of the year, when I imagine you to be reading this. Like many others in this field, I have made a career out of writing and reading apocalyptic novels, something that until a few days ago seemed like an honest late-century pursuit.

All that has changed now. In a few minutes the landscape of a very young century was changed utterly, along with everyone inside it; not just the present altered but the iconography of the future. Many near-future novels written in what is fast

becoming a lost world already seem antiquated. By chance I decided months ago to write about a novel that, in retrospect, seems like a message in a bottle thrown to us in 1975, from the day before yesterday.

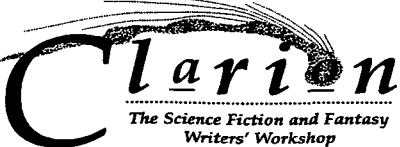
Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren* has just been reissued by Vintage Books, with the foreword originally composed by William Gibson for a 1996 Wesleyan University Press reprint. It was first published in 1974. For those of us who read it then, *Dhalgren* was less a novel than a genuine experience, a paper-and-ink construct that was the closest thing we had to hypertext, *The Matrix*, or the innumerable computer games that now litter our consciousness. I can vividly recall first reading, not the book itself but the review of it in *The New York Times Book Review*: a science fiction novel with sex in it. I bought it a few days later, in the mass market paperback edition that would eventually outsell *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Dhalgren was a book that did not merely change my life; it changed the way I looked at the world and, in a way that only the greatest books do, seemed to change the world itself.

The novel has no linear plot. Taken together, its famous last and first lines complete a circular narrative that encompasses the novel and the world it contains —

*Waiting here, away from the
terrifying weaponry, out
of the halls of vapor and light,
beyond holland and into the
hills, I have come to
to wound the autumnal city.*

The autumnal city is called Bellona, named for the war goddess who in Roman mythology was paired, as sister or wife, with Mars. But it is looking-glass logic that rules the world of *Dhalgren* — the novel and the city it describes are filled with lenses, prisms, mirrors, shadows and reflections — and at various points the city seems to be (among others) New York, D.C., San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit. Bellona is no city and all cities; it is created of the tangled memories of its inhabitants and may in fact be the distorted interior landscape, the “glangial city,” of the



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character who is closest to being *Dhalgren's* protagonist.

“...somewhere in this city is a character they call: The Kid. Age: ambiguous. Racial origin: same. True name: unknown. He lives among a group (whose alleged viciousness is only surpassed by their visible laziness) over which he holds a doubtful authority. They call themselves scorpions. He is the supposed author of a book that has been distributed widely in town. Since it is the only book in town, that it is

the most discussed work of the season is a dubious distinction. That and the intriguing situation of the author tend to blur accurate assessment of its worth. I admit: I am intrigued."

This encapsulation arrives towards the very end of 800 pages of some of the most densely written text of the last century; it is the closest one comes, really, to a summing-up of the novel. The novel "begins" with a young man entering Bellona, an American city that has survived an indescribable apocalypse. This holocaust has engulfed the rest of the country, maybe the entire world; it seems to have left the young man an amnesiac; he may also be insane, suffering from multiple personality disorder, or simply experiencing a weird form of synesthesia. The city itself exhibits symptoms of psychic disorders: the Moon and Sun rise and set and disappear erratically; time runs forward and backward or not at all; people cast no shadows, or too many; the sky is lost behind a constant fug of brown smoke. In its final pages, *Dhalgren* becomes an even more cryptic narrative, with substantial annotations as sidebars to the original text: one is reading

the same book that everyone else in the city of Bellona is reading.

Those who live in Bellona comprise a multicultural, multisexual, multigender stew of outcasts, oddballs, gang members. Notions of sexual or professional identity are no longer relevant. Neither is age, though Bellona's most valued currencies are those perennially favored by the young: Sex, Talk, and Art. Imagine the longest, loudest, strangest, most intense night you ever spent as an adolescent or young adult — fucking, drinking, taking drugs, sleeping, talking, fucking, reading, writing, fucking, fighting, talking, all while wandering through an endless, irredeemably damaged landscape. That is Delany's imagined city; but for those of us who came of age in the late 1960s and 1970s, it was a landscape that we inhabited in real time, in Chicago, in New York, and the Watts section of Los Angeles; along the riot corridor in Northeast D.C., which is where I lived. Reading the novel then, I felt that I was reading my own story; yet *Dhalgren* has a minatory epigraph: "You have confused the true and the real."

In a 1983 conversation with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, Delany said:

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On a world invaded by the Daha'et, the undead, only one force can destroy those who cannot be killed...and only one man and one woman can wield that force.

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—Linda Andrews, "Dancing in the Kitchen."

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"After all, if the book makes any social statement, it's that when society pulls the traditional supports out from under us, we all effectively become, not the proletariat, but the *lumpen* proletariat. It says that the complexity of 'culture' functioning in a gang of delinquents led by some borderline mental case is no less and no more than that functioning at a middle-class dinner party. Well, there are millions of people in this country who have already experienced precisely this social condition, because for one reason or another their supports at one time or another were actually struck away. For them, *Dhalgren* confirms something they've experienced. It redeems those experiences for them. For them, the book reassures that what they saw

was real and meaningful...."

In the face of inconceivable grief and loss and change it's difficult, if not impossible, to find solace in anything, including literature. It's a shattering realization; yet ultimately one turns back to music, poetry, paintings, film, text, and finds something that was not there before. *Dhalgren* is not a comforting book, but it is I think a great one — a secret history, a recovered memory of a time that was not, in 1974, our own. That's because its time is the present: We are all, now, residents of an autumnal city that has had its supports struck away.

Even if Henrik Drescher's name is unfamiliar, chances are you've seen his work. Parents will know him as the author/illustrator of children's books like *No Plain Pets!* and *Poems of A. Nonny Mouse*;

other readers will have seen his spidery drawings in places like *The New York Times Book Review* and *The New Yorker*. *Turbulence: A Log Book* is described by Drescher's publisher as "an innovative apocalyptic work of art in book form." But *Turbulence* seems more like a genuine artifact of apocalypse, a powerful and disturbing work that falls somewhere between outsider art (Drescher is a self-taught illustrator) and the more self-conscious creations of the Dadaists and Surrealists. Its actual subtitle is too long to quote here; it evokes the title of James Hampton's famous mystical assemblage, "The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly" (itself the title of a poetry collection by Denis Johnson).

Beautifully produced, *Turbulence* consists of a dreamlike narrative told almost entirely through image. The scant text is drawn primarily from Wendy Doniger's 1975 translation of Hindu myths; it focuses on the Hindu cycles of destruction and rebirth, and seems especially to refer to the *pralaya* or cosmic catastrophes which lead to

the dissolution and reabsorption of our world into the Eternal.

Meanwhile, Drescher's images show a middle-aged man boarding a cruise ship, opening a strange piece of baggage that contains a miniature of that same ship. The man settles, godlike, into a tub with the tiny ship before him. His reveries — variations on the themes of sacred sexual congress and sacrifice — serve to illustrate the Earth's destruction by fire and flood, and its ultimate reclamation.

For all its beauty — exquisite laser-cut pages, haunting collages and line drawings and fragments of text — *Turbulence* is not an easy book to read. Much of its nightmare imagery is extremely disturbing, though there is nothing vicarious or sensationalist about it: Drescher is clearly a visionary who sees "too clearly all that man is born for." One is left hoping that his vision is clear, and that "Immediately at the conclusion of the exhausted Kali Age, the minds of the people will become pure as flawless crystal, and they will be awakened as if at the conclusion of a night."



"One of the good old names in science fiction makes his first appearance in these pages..."—that's how Robert P. Mills introduced Jack Williamson's story "Beans" when it ran in our November 1958 issue.

In the four decades since, Jack Williamson has published another eight or nine stories with us. He has also published about seventeen more novels, including Manseed, Mazeway, The Silicon Dagger, and most recently, Terraforming Earth. A part of that novel, a novella entitled "The Ultimate Earth," recently brought the Grand Master another Hugo Award.

Now we bring you a thoughtful science fiction story and we look forward to the next appearance in our pages from one of the great old names in science fiction.

Afterlife

By Jack Williamson

“**W**E LIVE ON FAITH,” MY father used to say. “The afterlife is all we have.”

I wasn't sure of any afterlife.

My questions troubled my father, who was pastor of our little church. He made me kneel with him to pray and listen to long chapters from the Bible on the altar. That sacred book, he said, had come from the holy Mother Earth. It looked old enough, the brittle yellow pages breaking loose from the cracked leather binding, but if its miracles had ever really happened, that had been a hundred light-years away and long millennia ago.

“If there is a God,” I told him, “and if he heard our prayers, we'd all be dead before we ever got his answer.”

With an air of tragic sorrow, he warned me that such reckless words could put my immortal soul in danger.

“We ourselves are miracles,” he told me, “happening every day. Our whole planet was the Lord's miraculous answer to the prayers of the first Earthmen to land here. They found it rich in everything, and spoiled it with their own greed and folly.”

I heard the history of that from our one-legged schoolmaster. Our first dozen centuries had been a golden age. We settled both great continents, harvested the great forests, loaded fleets of space freighters with precious hardwoods and rare metals. All that wealth was gone two thousand years ago.

Sadly, he showed us a few precious relics he kept in the dusty cupboard he called a museum. There was a little glass tube that he said had shone with the light of a hundred candles when there was power to make it burn, and a dusty telephone that once had talked around the world.

We were born poor, in a poor little village. On the Sabbaths, my father preached in the adobe-walled church. On weekdays, he got into his dusty work clothes and ground corn on a little grist mill turned by a high waterwheel. His pay was a share of the meal.

Wheat grew on the flat land down in the valley below us, but the soil in our hill country had eroded too badly for wheat. Through most of the week we ate cornmeal mush for breakfast and corn pones for bread. Sometimes my mother made white bread or even honey cakes, when church members from the valley gave us wheat flour.

On the Sabbaths she played a wheezy old organ to accompany the hymns. I used to love the music and the promise of a paradise where the just and good would live happily forever, but now I saw no reason to believe it. With no life here at home, I longed to get away into the wider universe, but I saw no chance of that.

It's seven light-years to the nearest settled star system. The trade ships quit coming long ago, because we had nothing left to trade. There's only the mail ship, once every Earth year. It arrives nearly empty and leaves with every sling filled with those lucky people who find money for the fare.

It lands at the old capitol, far across the continent. I'd never been there, nor seen any kind of starship till the year I turned twelve. That quiet Sabbath morning, the rest of the family was gone in the wagon with my father to a revival meeting in another village down the river. Expecting no miracle there or anywhere, I'd been happy to stay home and do the chores.

Awakened by a rooster crowing, I was walking out to the barn to milk our three cows. I heard something thundering across the sky. In a moment I found it, a flash of silver when it caught the sun. I dropped the milk

bucket, staring while it wheeled low over the crumbled ruins of something that had stood on the hill west of us.

It turned and dived straight at me.

With no time to run, I stood frozen while it sank over the west pasture and the apple orchard. It struck the cornfield and plowed on though a cloud of dust and flying rocks till it stopped at the edge of my mother's kitchen. Its thunder ceased. It lay still, a smoking mass of broken metal.

I stood there watching, waiting for something more to happen. Nothing did. I caught my breath at last, and walked uneasily toward it. Nothing about it made any kind of sense until I looked into the long furrow it had dug and found a torn and bleeding human arm. A leg farther on, most of the skin torn off. Another naked leg, still attached to the mangled body. Finally a hairless skull grinning from the bottom of the ditch.

Dazed by the sudden strangeness of it, I thought I ought to call my father or the constable or the schoolmaster, but they were all away at the revival. I was still there, wondering what to do, when I saw a carrion bird hovering over the body. I shouted and threw stones to keep it away till some of the neighbors came from up the river. We gathered up what we could, the smallest red scraps in my milk bucket, and carried them into the church.

The sheriff came on horseback, the doctor with him. They frowned over the body parts, laid out on a long table made of planks laid across the benches. The doctor fitted them closer together to see if anything was missing. The sheriff picked up pieces of broken metal, scowled at them uneasily, threw them back in the ditch.

They all left at last, for their dinners or whatever they had to do. I think they were afraid of too much they didn't understand. So was I, but I didn't like the flies buzzing around the body. I went home for a sheet to cover it. After a cold corn pone and a bowl of clabbered milk for lunch, I came back to look at the wreck again, and watch the empty sky. Nothing else came down.

Evening came. I milked the cows again, fed the pig, found a dozen eggs in the nests. I heard dogs barking and went back to the church to be certain the door was closed. Night fell as I was walking home. Our planet has no moon. In the sudden darkness, the stars were a blaze of diamonds.

I stopped to look up at them, wondering about the stranger. Where was his home? Why had he come here? What could have gone so terribly wrong when he tried to land? The answers were beyond me, but I stood there a long time, wishing I'd been born somewhere else, with a chance to see worlds more exciting than our own.

In the empty house, I lit a candle, ate another corn pone and a piece of fried chicken my mother had left for me, went to bed. Trying to forget the vulture circling over that skinned skull in the ditch, I lay listening to the tick of the old clock in the hall till I heard the rattle of my father's wagon.

My mother and my sister came in the house while he drove on to stable the team. News of the dead stranger stopped their chatter about the meeting. My father lit a candle lantern when he heard about it, and we all walked across the road to the church. My mother lifted the sheet to look at the body.

She screamed and my father dropped the lantern.

"Alive! It's alive!"

The candle had gone out. I shivered when I heard some small creature scurry away in the dark. My father's hands must have been shaking; it took him a long time to find a match to light the candle again. The long naked body was a man's, black with dried blood and horribly scarred, but somehow whole again.

The bald skull had hair again, a short pale fuzz. The eyes were open, staring blindly up into the dark. The body seemed stiff and hard, but I saw the blood-caked chest rise and slowly fall. My mother reached to touch it, and said she felt a heartbeat.

My father made me saddle my pony and go for the doctor. I had to hammer at the door a long time before he came out in his underwear to call me crazy for waking him in the middle of the night with such a cock-and-bull story. If we had a live man there at the church, it had to be some drunk who had crept inside to sober up.

Still angry, he finally dressed and saddled a horse to come back with me. My mother had lit candles at the altar. My father was on his knees before it, praying. The doctor threw the sheet off the man, felt his wrist, and said he'd be damned.

"The hand of God!" my father whispered, backing away and dropping

back to his knees. "A holy miracle! We prayed at the meeting for a sign to help us persuade the unbelievers. And the good Lord has answered!"

"Maybe." The doctor squinted at me. "Or is it some trick of Satan?"

My mother brought a basin of warm water and helped him wash off the clots of blood and mud. His eyes closed, the man seemed to be sleeping. He woke when day came, and sat up to stare blankly at the empty benches around him. His blond hair and beard had grown longer. The scars had disappeared.

My mother asked how he felt.

He blinked at her and shivered, wrapping the sheet around himself.

"Are you the Son of God?" My father knelt before him. "Have you come to save the world?"

He shook his head in a puzzled way.

My mother asked if he was hungry. He nodded, and rose unsteadily when she asked if he could. She took his hand and led him out of the church and down the street to our house. He limped slowly beside her, peering around him as if everything was strange.

"Sir?" The doctor came up beside him. "Can you tell us who you are?"

He made a strange animal grunt and shook his head again.

At our house, my mother brought him a glass and a pitcher of apple juice. He gulped it thirstily and sat watching her fix breakfast. My father brought clothing for him, and a pair of shoes. He sat frowning at them and finally stood up to dress himself, slow and clumsy about it, and let me tie the shoes.

"Sir?" The doctor stood watching. "Where are you from?"

"Earth." He spoke at last, his voice deep and slow. "I am here from Mother Earth."

My mother set a plate for him. He studied the knife and fork as if they were new to him, but plied them ravenously when she brought a platter of ham and scrambled eggs. She had set plates for the doctor and my father, but they forgot to eat.

"You were dead." My father was hoarse with awe. "How can you live again?"

"I was never dead." He reached to stab another slice of ham. "I am eternal."

"Eternal?" The doctor blinked and squinted at him. "Do you mean immortal?"

"I — " He paused as if he had to search for words. "I do not die."

"I saw you dead." The doctor swallowed hard and watched him slice the ham. "What brought you back?"

"The power." Smiling as though glad to find what to say, he wiped his lips with a slice of white bread. "The immortal power that moves the mortal body."

"I see," the doctor muttered, as if he really did. "Why are you here?"

"If immortality interests you, that is what I bring."

The doctor blinked, startled into silence. My father muttered something under his breath and moved to a chair across the room. My mother had made a pot of tea. The man drained a tall glass of it, sweetened with honey. Seeming to grow stronger and brighter, he began asking questions. He wanted to know about our history, cities, industries, governments, ways of travel. Did ships from Earth ever land here? I thought he looked pleased that the mail skipper was not due soon. Our neighbors had crowded the kitchen by then, and we all moved into the front room. Somebody asked his name.

"Who cares?" He shrugged, standing tall in the middle of the room. "Your world is new to me. I come to you as a new man, an agent of eternity. I bring you the gift of eternal life."

"Eternal?" The doctor had recovered his voice. "Just what do you mean?"

"My secrets are my own." He was suddenly smiling, his voice resonant and strong. "But if you wish to live forever, follow me."

Too many people had pushed into our house by then, and the blacksmith wanted to take him to speak at the church. Stubbornly, my father shook his head.

"I don't know what he is, but he claims no power from God. He could be a son of Satan, scheming to trap our souls for hell. I don't want him in my church. Get him out of my house!"

"He's slick as a barrel of eels," the doctor agreed. "I wouldn't believe him if he swore the sun came up this morning. But I don't—" He shrugged uneasily toward the wreckage in the cornfield. "I want to know more about him."

The sheriff escorted him to a vacant lot. My father stayed away, but I followed with my sister. The sheriff helped him to the top of an old stone

slab that must have supported some public monument when our world was great. We all crowded around. He stood silent while the blacksmith spoke to tell how he had risen from the dead. The murmur of voices died into breathless expectation as we waited for him to speak. I heard a dog barking somewhere, and a rooster crowing. I thought he looked handsome, even in the misfit garments.

"He can't be the demon Dad says he is." I saw a glow of awed admiration on my sister's face. "I believe he's an angel sent from Heaven to save us."

He spread his arms to beckon us closer.

"I see that your world has suffered misfortune."

His voice rang loud and clear, but he paused to gesture at the muddy ruts we called a street and our straggle of mud-walled, straw-roofed homes. He turned to nod at the rubble mounds of what had been a city on the hill behind him.

"I knew poverty like yours back on the mother world. It is ruled by the rich. They live in great mansions, with swarms of servants and every luxury. Skipping time on space flights to their estates on other planets, they stretch their lives almost forever. The very richest can pay for microbots."

"Microbots?" the doctor shouted. "What are they?"

"Tiny robots." He slowed his voice to help us understand. "They circulate like cells in the blood, repairing all the damage of illness and age. Their owners are immortal, gathering wealth and knowledge and power as they live though century after century. They have everything."

"We mortals were poor as you are."

He shrugged at the shabby streets with a grimace of remembered pain.

"Poorer, because they have kept us down, generation after generation born to toil and die in ignorance of all that might have helped us. To keep us humble, they have allowed us to learn no more than our tasks required. Most have no escape except to breed another generation to suffer and die as we have always done."

"I was lucky. My mother's husband worked as a janitor in a university that taught the children of the rich. He stole books and holo cubes to let me learn at home. She was a housemaid for an immortal scientist. They had an affair they never confessed, but my mother told me I am his son."

He made me his lab assistant when I was old enough, finally made me his subject for the experiment that made me eternal."

I heard a buzz of excitement in the crowd, and then a volley of breathless questions.

"If you don't believe, ask those who saw me arrive." He paused to let his eyes search out the doctor, the sheriff, me. "They saw my body heal from what they thought was death."

"I saw a dead man," the doctor muttered uneasily. "But I don't know how —"

His voice trailed off.

"I'll tell you how." The stranger smiled, and his voice pealed louder. "I bring you my father's secret gift to me, something simpler than the microbots and a better way to immortality. It has alarmed the old immortals, who have made laws and broken laws to keep the microbots for themselves forever.

"They raided and wrecked my father's lab, left me for dead. I recovered. My mother brought me the keys to his private skipship. I am not a pilot, but I had watched him drive the ship. The robotic controls got me here, though I botched the landing and injured myself."

Wryly, he gestured toward the twisted metal in the cornfield.

"You have seen how I recovered."

He spread his arms again and posed to display his body. Splendid now, it showed no scars. I saw a flash of gold from his hair, now grown almost to his shoulders, and heard a soft cry from my sister. Awe had hushed the crowd. Far off, I heard the rooster crow again.

"A child of God!" my sister whispered. "Here to save us!"

People stood frozen for a moment, then pushed anxiously closer. I heard a babble of questions.

"Can you make me whole again?" That was the blacksmith's crippled son, caked with smoke and sweat from the forge. "How can we repay you?"

"Just follow me," he said. "Do as I say."

He had brought his gift for all mankind, he said. He wanted to carry it on to the capitol. The blacksmith passed a hat for money to buy him a horse. The tailor gave him a jacket. The sheriff deputized the schoolmaster to be his bodyguard and show him the way. He slept that night at the

doctor's house. When he left next morning, the doctor, the blacksmith, and the schoolmaster rode away with him. My sister came out with me to watch them go by. She broke into tears as they passed.

"An angel!" she whispered. "I'd die to be with him."

She stood in the dusty street looking after them till he was gone from sight, and waited with the rest of us, hoping for him to return. He never did. She grew up to be a beautiful woman and the mistress of our one-room school. The blacksmith's son courted her devotedly, but she never forgot the stranger.

An artist of some talent, she painted a portrait of him, standing on a planet out in starry space, a golden halo shining above his head. It hung in her room, above a candle and a scrap of twisted metal from his ship. Once I caught her kneeling to it.

With nowhere else to go, most of us stayed at home in the village. The doctor's young bride learned to make her living as a midwife. The blacksmith's son got his younger brother to help at the forge and became a smith himself. News moves slowly on our planet, but we began to hear tales of the miraculous Agent who had risen from death, won new believers by the thousand, built a magnificent Temple of Eternity at the capitol. My sister longed to follow him there, and cried when my father called him the Agent of Satan.

The doctor and the schoolmaster returned at last, in a coach drawn by four fine black horses, a uniformed driver seated in front and a footman standing behind. Another four-horse team pulled a long, black-painted wagon. They stopped on the village square. Half a dozen men in long black robes climbed out of the wagon to set up a platform on one side of the coach and a black tent on the other. They unpacked drums and trumpets and instruments I had never seen, and brought the street to life with music I had never heard.

When a curious crowd had gathered, the schoolmaster hopped out of the black wagon, still nimble on his wooden leg. No longer the shabby little mouse I remembered, he was robed in gold and black velvet.

"My father?" The blacksmith's son limped anxiously to meet him. "Is he coming home?"

The trumpets drowned anything the schoolmaster said.

"Is he — is he dead?"

"Alive." The schoolmaster waved his hand. The music stopped, and he lifted his voice for the rest of us. "Alive forever, safe in Eternity."

He strutted to the coach and climbed to stand on the driver's seat. His voice pealed louder. Our village was a sacred place, he said, because here the Agent had died and risen again from death. He and the doctor had been blessed to witness that first miracle. As chosen Voices of Eternity, they had now returned to share the blessing of eternal life with all of their old friends who wished it.

My father had pushed to the front of the crowd.

"By what power, and by what name," he demanded, "do you preach the resurrection of the dead?"

"The Agent has power enough of his own." Glaring down at him, schoolmaster waved as if to knock him aside. "He needs no other name, and some of you here witnessed his own resurrection."

"I call him by his true names," my father shouted. "Satan! Lucifer! Beelzebub! The Prince of Darkness!" He dropped his voice. "I am sorry to hear you repeating his lies, because all of you were once true children of our true Lord. I beg you to repent and confess, that your mortal sins may be blotted out — "

The schoolmaster gestured, and a bray of trumpets drowned the words.

"You call yourselves Voices," my father tried again. "I beg you to listen for the voice of God. Listen to Him in your hearts, speaking through the Holy Ghost."

"I never met a holy ghost."

My father flushed red at the mockery.

"Listen to the words of Eternity!" The schoolmaster raised his head to look beyond my father. "We bring you something better than myth and ignorant superstition. I pray you to heed the verities of scientific truth and save your own precious lives. Learn the new science of veronics. For you with open minds, let me lay out the actual facts."

"Facts?" my father shouted. "Or Satanic lies?"

The blacksmith's son caught his arm.

"The words of the Agent." The schoolmaster frowned as if we were backward students. "He has taught the simple truth. The veron is an energy particle. Carrying neither mass nor dimension, it is mind without

matter. The so-called human soul in fact the veronic being. The Agent has taught us how to liberate it into Eternity. Freed from slavery to the mortal flesh, with all its faults and ills, your immortal minds can live forever."

He paused for a paean of rousing music, and asked for questions when it ceased.

What proof could he offer?

"Look inside yourselves." He paused, with nods and smiles of recognition for my mother and my sister. "Haven't every one of you hated the limits and pains of your bodies? Haven't you all enjoyed moments of liberty from space and time, as you recalled the past, looked into the future, thought of far-off friends? Those were precious glimpses of your future freedoms in eternity!

"If you want to live forever, step forward now!"

The doctor came down from the coach to a table set up in front of the black tent. Robed like the schoolmaster in gold and black velvet, he had grown grayer and fatter than I recalled him. Silently, he spread his arms to urge us forward. The music rose again. The blacksmith's deserted wife hobbled toward him. Arthritic and blind, she leaned on her limping son.

"Eat. Drink." Intoning the words, the doctor gestured at a platter and a pitcher on the table. "One little wafer and one small sip of this veronic fluid will break the chains of flesh to set you free. But you must be warned."

He dropped his voice and raised his hands.

"This final feast is only for those who trust the Agent and accept the miracle of his resurrection. Once you have felt the joy of eternity, there is no turning back. I must remind you also that you take nothing with you."

Tears washing white channels down his dark-grimed face, the blacksmith's son shouted the warning into his mother's ear. She mumbled and opened her mouth. He dropped jingling coins into a basket on the table. The doctor laid a tiny white wafer on her tongue, put a little glass of a blood-red liquid to her drooling lips. She gulped it down. Two men in black took her arms to help her into the tent.

Next came the baker's old and helpless father, moaning on a stretcher carried by the baker and his helper. A dozen others shuffled forward. Finally my sister. Tears on her face, she hugged our mother and our father,

darted to startle the blacksmith's son with a kiss and a quick embrace, and fell into the line. I caught her arm to pull her back.

"Let her go." My father was hoarse with pain. "She has damned herself."

The solemn music rose again. The line crept forward, my sister the last. My father knelt on the ground, murmuring a prayer. My mother stood silently sobbing. My sister dropped something into the basket, the gold necklace and gold earrings the blacksmith's son had given her. I heard a stifled moan from him. Smiling, she swallowed the wafer and the liquid. My mother cried out, shrill with pain. My sister looked back and tried to speak, but her voice was already gone. Her features stiffened. She staggered. The black robes hustled her into the tent.

With a final flourish, the music ceased. The doctor intoned a solemn assurance that these beloved beings were happy now, forever free from grief and care. He and the schoolmaster climbed back into the coach. The musicians dismantled their instruments and knocked down the platform where they had stood. They rolled up the black tent, loaded everything on the wagon, and followed the coach back to the road down the river.

The bodies were left lying in a row on the ground. My mother knelt to close my sister's eyes. My father stood above them to beg the Lord that all their sins and blunders might be forgiven and their souls received into God's own paradise. Neighbor men toiled all night, nailing coffins together. Next day a pastor came from the village below to preach a farewell service before the boxes were lowered into the row of new graves.

One morning next spring, while my mother was making breakfast, we saw a bright silver skipship lying in the cornfield where the stranger's craft had fallen. Another tall stranger was poking into the tangle of tall weeds and rusted metal where it had stopped. He came across the garden to our door.

When I answered his knock, he displayed a holo card that showed the bright round Earth spinning in starry black space. Silver print across it identified him as a field inspector for the Pan-Terran Police. Pointing back at the wreck, he asked for anything we knew about it. My mother asked him to share our grits and bacon while we told him what we could about the ship and the Agent and the Church of Eternity.

"We believed — " She broke into tears when she spoke of my sister's death. "We had seen him risen from the dead. She trusted him."

"Satan!" my father rasped. "He dragged my daughter down to Hell!"

"He was a criminal." The inspector nodded in sober sympathy. "The tale he told you was largely a hoax. It's true that he was a native Earthman, but no verons exist, no veronic bodies either. Though he did have microbots in his blood, he had no skills or know-how to share them with anybody else."

Sobbing, my mother rose to leave the room.

"Listen to him!" My father was hoarse with his own emotion. "The Lord will help us bear the truth."

"A vicious criminal." Regretfully, the inspector shook his head. "But also the victim of tragedy. He was the offspring of a mortal woman's illicit affair with an immortal. He inherited his father's microbots. They should have been destroyed, but that would have crippled or probably killed him. It must have been a desperate choice, but his mother kept him as he was and kept his secret till he was grown. She was arrested when the truth came out, but he escaped in his father's skipship. I regret the harm he did here, but at least his evil career is over."

"Over?" My father stared at him. "If he is immortal — "

"His church officials will no doubt claim that he's still alive in some veronic paradise." The inspector grinned. "But microbots aren't magic. They are only electronic devices. When we located him here, we were able to shut them down with a radio signal. His natural body functions had become dependent on the microbots. His heart stopped when they did."

"He will trouble you no longer."

"Thank you, sir." My father reached over the table to shake his hand. "You have served as a faithful agent of the Lord."

"Or the Pan-Terran Police."

After breakfast, the inspector asked me to clear the weeds around the wreckage to let him take holos of it. He walked with my father over our little farm and wanted to see the farm tools and the mules in the barn. He looked at my mother's garden and asked about the plants she grew. He had me show him the windmill and the water wheel and the grist mill, and tell him how they worked.

He watched me slop the hogs and milk the cows that night, and went with my parents to the hymn service at the church while I stayed home

to finish the chores. My mother let him sleep in the room that had been my sister's. Next morning he watched my father kindle the fire in the old cast iron stove and watched my mother fix the breakfast. When we had eaten, he looked sharply at me and asked what I planned for the future.

"I never had a future," I told him. "I always longed to get away, but never had a chance."

"If he had a chance — " He turned to my parents. "Could you let him go?"

They stared at him and whispered together.

"If he could really get away — " My mother tried to smile at my father.

"We have each other."

My father nodded solemnly. "The Lord's will be done."

The inspector let his shrewd eyes measure me again.

"It would be forever," he told me gravely. "As final as death."

"Let him go," my father said. "He has earned his own salvation."

The inspector took me out to see his skipship. It was strange and wonderful, but I was too dazed and anxious to understand what he said about it. He had me sit, looked me in the eye, and asked for more about my life.

"I stay alive," I told him. "I'm the janitor for my father's church, though I've never caught his faith. I help him at the mill and help my mother in her garden."

My heart thumping, I waited again until he asked, "Would you like to be immortal?"

Hardly breathing, I found no words to say.

"Perhaps you can be," he said. "If you want the risk. The immortals have to guard their own future. They want no rivals here, but they have agreed to let us send an expedition to colonize the Andromeda galaxy. There's a two-million-year skip each way, which leaves them safe from any harm from us."

He frowned and shook his head.

"We ourselves can't feel so confident. No skip so far has ever been attempted. It's a jump into the dark, with no data to let us compute any sure destination. We may be lost forever from our own universe of space, with no way back. Even if we're lucky, we'll have new frontiers to face, with our industrial infrastructure still to build. We're likely to need the

skills and the knowledge you have learned here. I can sign you on, if you want the chance."

I said I did.

My mother dried her tears and kissed me. My father made us kneel and pray together. I hugged them both, and the inspector took me with him to board the departing mother ship.



ALL THAT WAS TWO million years ago and two million light-years behind us. That long jump dropped us into the gravity well of a giant black hole, but we were able to coast around it in free fall, with no harm at all.

The third skip brought us into low orbit around our new planet, a kind world that had no native life and needed no terraforming. My low-tech skills did help us stay alive. The microbots have learned them, and we are well established now.

I have recalled this story for our children and their microbots to remember. I was at first uneasy about letting the microbots into my body. For a long time I hardly felt them, but they're beginning now to give me a new zest for life, a new happiness with all my new friends, an endless delight in the wonders of our new world.

Our new sky blazes with more stars than I ever imagined, all in strange constellations, but on a clear night we can make out our home galaxy, a faint fleck of brightness low in the south. Remembering my parents, who lived so far away and long ago, I wish they could have known the true afterlife we've discovered here.



Steven Utley's Silurian Tales are time-travel stories that take us to an age that doesn't seem as glamorous as, say, the Jurassic period, but there's still good drama to be had from the age when trilobites ruled the Earth. (Ruled!!!) The last one we published was "Cloud by van Gogh" in our December 2000 issue, but others have appeared elsewhere and Mr. Utley says he is working on a full book's worth of these stories. He hopes to have them finished before the next ice age. Meantime, we have this one to chew on...

Foodstuff

By Steven Utley

THE BOAT TAKING ME upriver broke down the first afternoon out of Stinktown. Doug, the boatman, ran in close to the bank, apologized for what he said would be only a slight delay, and disappeared belowdecks to fuss with his malfunctioning motor or balky galley slaves, whichever.

Till now, I'd kept pretty much to myself, and so had the other passenger. Which suited me just fine. I'd been bunged up on arrival and spent some time in sickbay — jumping through a spacetime anomaly is about as much fun as riding in a spin dryer full of rocks — and I still felt rotten. I was behind schedule, too, which made me feel rottener. There had been a third passenger when we set out, a bland-looking fellow who got off before we even left the marshes behind. The whole time he'd been aboard he just sat on a crate and played a recorder, with a beatific look on his face. He played well, coaxing out of that simple instrument of his what I supposed was something by Mozart, or maybe one of the B's. Given my druthers, he'd've stayed and played, and the other passenger would've

gone over the side. As soon as he'd gone, though, The Other Passenger approached with a sort of ducking and bobbing movement, like a stray dog wanting to make friends. There was no way I could pretend not to notice him, so I made a show of pausing in the insertion of my earbook and let him introduce himself as Ellis something or something Ellis (he mumbled), tell me his specialty (something botanical), and make a joke appropriate to our situation (never mind). I replied in kind, skipping only the joke. It really was like feeding a stray dog: he brightened appreciably and stopped mumbling.

He said, "I found the propelling idea for my own line of research in one of Kelly's early monographs."

"Whose?"

"Ivan Kelly. He did a lot of pioneering work here on the evolution of soil and the part mid-Paleozoic terrestrial organisms played in the transformation of sterile regolith into real soil."

"Oh," I said blankly, "him."

"But Kelly also got stranded far inland once and had to eat whatever he could find for a few days. You know, primitive plants and invertebrates. I want to prove that people could live off the land here indefinitely if they had to."

I gave him my best look of mild disapproval. "It's not just the thought of eating slime and bugs. I'm a surveyor, not an ecologist, but even I know this is a delicate ecosphere. I don't think people should be making a real effort to find out what there is to eat here."

"There're already things here eating each other and the plants."

"Take it from a guy who's seen bulldozers mow down forests and mountains in an afternoon. Human beings always end up taking bigger bites than anything else."

"I know. That's why, back in our own time, the world isn't any too homelike anymore. People've made it so. The day will come, though, when a few people here decide not to go back. A few determined, resourceful people could live here."

"I don't think anybody could survive here very long. There's no wood for fire or tools. No soil to grow crops in."

"You'd hardly need tools."

"Yeah, not if all you wanted was to eke out an existence as a hunter-

gatherer. If you were willing to jettison all the trappings of civilization."

He dared to sneer slightly, and when I didn't immediately assault him, he broadened it. "You mean like computers, television, government?"

"I mean books, music, art, and science and technology."

"Maybe the kind of people I have in mind wouldn't want all those things. Maybe they'd know better this time. They could make this into a very different Earth."

"This is already a very different Earth."

He'd come a good way from mumbling in just a few short minutes; now he spoke with an intensity I had to begin to find creepy. I decided to cut the conversation short and remarked that I really was hopelessly behind in my work and without further adieu stuck in the earbook. It was actually a novel, but he couldn't know. He nodded, backed away, retreated to the stern, where he made a show of admiring the scenery. The Paleozoic landscape is a very nearly bare stage, with a thin fuzz of greenery along its edges. It looks as unpromising as a teenager's first mustache. There's nothing like it to make you mix your metaphors.

But if there hadn't been much to look at while the boat was moving, there was even less now that it had stopped. Ellis must have debated with himself for all of five or six minutes before deciding that I was a lesser evil than boredom. When I saw him start to sidle forward again, I pointedly gazed off into the middle distance and looked rapt. He moved by me and went to the bow, as though that was where he'd been intending to go anyway, and pretended to admire the scenery from that end of the boat.

The sun climbed down the sky. Doug emerged from belowdecks, with so much machine gunk on him he resembled an old-time minstrel, and told us, "Guess we'll be spending the night here."

I asked, "Can't you call Stinktown for help?"

"I could, but I'm a civilian contractor, and I have my reputation to consider."

"Like your boat breaking down in the middle of nowhere won't affect your reputation."

He smiled tightly. "I can fix the engine, but it's gonna take a while longer." He held up his grimy hands. "Either one of you feel like cooking dinner?"

I looked at Ellis and shrugged and said, "I'll cook." You spend any time in the field, you better know how to fix dinner. But I quickly added, "This once."

Ellis shrugged in turn, trying to look casual. "I'll cook tomorrow."

Doug said, "Okay, good," and went below again.

I went below, too, to the tiny galley. The stores were the usual desiccated stuff, but I flung together this and that and called it an onion soufflé, and Doug, at least, seemed willing to give me the benefit of the doubt once we'd crammed ourselves into the eating area. He'd evidently immersed himself in solvent, because he came to dinner looking spotless and smelling faintly, not unpleasantly, of chemicals.

When he had cleaned his plate, Ellis said to Doug, "Are we going to be here very long tomorrow?"

"As long as it takes."

"Then I want to look around. There's an ideal spot at that bend ahead. That bank's bound to have submerged hollows, perfect hideouts."

"Hideouts for what?"

"Fish."

Doug looked just about as incredulous as I felt.

"Be right back," said Ellis, and bolted from the table. He returned dragging, I swear, fishing tackle, which he unloaded untidily in our midst. "First let me show you my rod."

"Not on your life," I said, but he went ahead and showed off his rod, and his net, and the works. "I can't believe you used your personal baggage allowance for this junk."

"I'm one of those rare individuals who's truly able to combine pleasure and research."

"What pleasure?"

"Everyone must have their pastimes."

"I agree. That's why I brought lots of music and long, dense nineteenth-century novels. You can listen to music and read practically anywhere. Fishing, though."

"You don't fish?"

"I was born and raised in a Kansas wheat field."

"So you don't know the first thing about fishing."

That struck me as serious talk from someone I was becoming more

and more convinced didn't know the first thing about anything. "The idea's to get the fish on the hook, is it not?"

"Ostensibly," Doug cut in. I looked at him in surprise; he lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug. "Definitely, if you're fishing for your supper. I like fishing, too. Or I did, back home. You sometimes fish simply to be at peace with everything."

"Everything except the fish, I guess."

"I bear the fish no malice. Unless I was hungry, I always released the ones I caught. I enjoy fishing for the sake of fishing."

"I see. It's a zen exercise."

We had been ignoring Ellis. "Here and now," he cut in resentfully, "I'm going to catch fish for food *and* study." He opened a leather case, and its contents lay gleaming in the light from the overhead. "I made all of these lures myself, to experiment with." He pointed to some nasty-looking bare barbs. "Those're just for raw bait, of course, for fish that hunt by smell or taste. But these — " he indicated several colorful tied flies " — are designed to attract those that hunt by sight. And this — " a bullet-like thing " — is for fish that hunt by sound."

"Fish don't have ears."

"They have vibration sensor organs." He motioned for me to hold out my hand, then picked up the bullet-like thing, gave it a twist, and dropped it into my palm, where it lay humming and tickling insistently.

"My ex traded me in for one of these," I said, "only larger."

Doug had been regarding Ellis's battery of lures with undisguised skepticism. Now he said, "I hate to be the one to have to tell you, but there isn't a fish on Earth now with the physical or mental equipment to snap at one of your lures."

"I guess we'll find out if that's true."

I said, "I've heard reports — no, maybe they're only rumors — something, anyhow, about freshwater sharks."

"Pseudosharklets," Doug said, "little things, about as long as your hand. They have jaws, and they eat invertebrates."

"Wouldn't be much sport in catching a fish that tiny."

"The sport," Doug said, "is in standing hip-deep in muddy water for hours."

"Very relaxing, I'm sure."

Once again we were ignoring Ellis. "Well," he announced, "I have a more serious purpose than sport. I am, as the saying goes, after bigger fish."

"Read my lips," Doug said. "There are no big fish here. If you pull anything bigger than my hand out of this creek or any other body of water here in the Paleozoic, I'll eat it."

"Good!"

I didn't like the way he said that. Not at all.

"I've been thinking a lot lately," he went on, "that everybody could use a change from the same old foodstuffs."

Doug looked at him suspiciously. "What's wrong with the same old foodstuffs? We've got all my favorites."

Ellis wrinkled his nose. "Dried vegetables, rice, oatmeal, and the ever-popular meat bar. While, mathematically speaking, the number of possible combinations is astronomical, the practical combinations are limited. I've been experimenting."

Doug shook his head. "Don't like the sound of that word, experiment. Don't like it at all."

I nodded agreement. "Not where food's concerned."

"Hear me out. I volunteer to do lunch if you'll give me a free hand."

"Hell, no," Doug said.

"What he said," I said.

Ellis was clearly disappointed. "I don't get it. I bet, ordinarily, back home, you guys'd eat almost anything. Stale pizza, undermicrowaved frozen food."

"We knew what that stuff was," said Doug.

"You're as bad as little kids."

"There's also the matter of nutrition," I said. "What about vitamins and minerals? Protein?"

"Well, that's part of my project, too. I'm on the lookout for esculent Paleozoic organisms."

"What kind?" Doug asked.

"Suitable for use as human food. This is not off-the-wall stuff. It isn't just paleobiological research I'm interested in. I've always been fascinated by the history of food. I've always wondered who figured out things like how to make bread or what you had to do to an olive to make it edible."

"How about who figured out how to turn a cow into a meat bar?"

Ellis pretended I hadn't spoken. "And fugu! What about fugu? Who figured out which part of the blowfish is edible and which part'll kill you dead?"

"Maybe people in some Japanese fishing village," Doug said. "Blowfish was all they could catch that week, and they were starving."

"Well, even if they were, you'd think as soon as the first couple of people keeled over dead — "

"Well, maybe it was some Japanese nobleman who just rounded up a bunch of peasants and told 'em, Each of you eat part of this blowfish, I want to see what happens. What're they gonna do? The choice's between *maybe* being poisoned if they comply or *definitely* getting their heads lopped off if they don't."

"Well, be that as it may," Ellis said, "I propose to see what I can do with the materials available locally. Back at Stinktown, I sampled the fish, shellfish, seaweeds. Here — "

"Yuck," said Doug, "seaweed!"

"It's the same stuff you find wrapped around sushi — "

"Yuck," said Doug, "sushi," but Ellis kept right on talking.

" — or it's its ancestor, anyway."

"How can you be sure," I asked, "those things aren't all loaded with defensive toxins? Or that one of those ugly little fish isn't the Paleozoic equivalent of fugu. You want to poison yourself, don't let anybody stop you. But don't be wanting to poison everyone else with you."

"I've devised a few simple tests to determine the presence of toxins. However, this is not a sophisticated biota, relative to what we know back in our own time. In four hundred million years, land plants will have evolved all sorts of chemical defenses against parasites and things. The little stems we see here, though, they're just barely plants as it is. They don't even have roots. They haven't evolved the complex range of chemical defenses their descendants need because there isn't the horde of parasites here."

"Doesn't mean that some preadapted sprig couldn't put us all in our graves," Doug said. "It doesn't even have to kill us, it might just give us the runs."

"I want to give it a try, all the same. I promise you that I shall never set anything before you that I haven't subjected to rigorous chemical

analysis." Ellis looked from Doug to me and back. "Come on. In the spirit of scientific inquiry. Look, don't say yes or no now, sleep on it." He gathered up his junk, somehow without putting out anyone's eye, and left us sitting.

"Don't know about you," Doug said, "but I'm not inclined to be one of his guinea pigs."

"Think I'll pass, too." I put my tongue between my molars for a second. "Still, he's got a point, hasn't he? The knowledge of what's edible and what's not might come in handy. Survival in the wilderness and all that. What if our boat were to break down in the middle of nowhere?"

"Oh," said Doug, "that's funny. Ha, ha." His pocket beeper went off. "That's for the radio. Must be a weather report." He worked himself free and rose from the table. Over his shoulder, he let me have it between the eyes with one last Ha.

THE NIGHT was no cooler than the day. The three of us spread pallets on deck, and Ellis tried to launch us into conversation again, but Doug told him to shut up and go to sleep. Their voices were the only sounds under the black starshot Paleozoic sky; the exchange was jarring. I tossed and writhed and don't remember sleeping at all, though at one point I noticed that the moon had suddenly changed position. Then — again, suddenly — I heard the engine turning over. I opened my eyes and saw the sun hovering its own diameter above the eastern horizon. The engine stopped. I sat up and looked around. I was alone on deck. Doug was in the galley, brewing coffee and mixing oatmeal and dried fruit. "Engines fixed," he said as he handed me a cup.

"Then we can be on our merry way."

"Not just yet."

"Christ. What's the problem now?"

"There's still something I've got to take care of."

I looked around. "Where's Ellis?"

"Said he was going grocery shopping."

"Uh oh."

"Do me a favor, help me keep an eye on Nature Boy this morning, will you?"

I sat down heavily. "He's really a flake, isn't he?"

"You — we probably don't know the half of it."

"Did he take all that ridiculous fishing gear with him?"

"Nope. Just a net and a couple of plastic buckets. Anyway, we don't want him wandering off or getting hurt."

"We don't?"

"Have some oatmeal."

After breakfast, I went up on deck. At first there was no sign of Ellis, but then I saw him wading well upstream; every now and then he'd bend down, reach into the water, and put something into one of the buckets. My first impulse was to yell at him to get out of the goddamn water. Then I thought, So what if a eurypterid does get him? Eurypterid is Greek, or maybe it's Latin, for "big ugly water bug with an attitude."

No such luck, though. I tired of waiting to see him pulled under and plugged in my earbook and went back to *The Way of All Flesh*. Thus far, it had gone kind of like an Anthony Trollope novel with bamboo splints shoved under its fingernails — Samuel Butler suffered from no deficiency of bile — but now it had a somehow soothing effect. I found myself enjoying it even more, Ellis having provided me with a face for Butler's unlovable main character.

Doug came on deck after a while and busied himself checking the crates lashed amidships, then went into the wheelhouse, came back out, went below, came back up, went back into his wheelhouse, fiddled with the radio, came back out, etc. I hadn't figured him for the anxious type, but you just never know; if anyone had a right to be antsy, it was me. He kept looking downriver, in the direction of Stinktown, and checking his wristwatch, too. Finally I called to him, "Don't worry, I've had my eye on him the whole time, he's right over yonder," and pointed to Ellis. Doug glanced in that direction and nodded to me, but he made no attempt to summon Ellis, just went into a new cycle of repetitions, wheelhouse, deck, look around, check the time.

The morning wore on. Ellis returned lugging his now-filled buckets and went straight down into the galley. A little before noon, he reemerged and proudly announced that luncheon was served.

I took my time getting up, and Doug, whom I could see in the wheelhouse, hesitated as well before bestirring himself. Down in the galley, Ellis set steaming plates before us.

"What is it," I asked, "creamed spinach?"

"Of course not. The green stuff's a water plant."

"I'm not eating pond scum," Doug said.

"It's not pond scum. The pink strips're fish." Ellis looked at me smugly. "Protein, you know."

Doug said, "I'm not eating this stuff, whatever it is." He pushed the plate away, reached around to grab things out of the food locker, and stuck a slice of meat bar between two crackers.

"Come on," Ellis implored me, "just taste it. Look," and he conveyed some green slime from his own plate to his mouth. I watched carefully to see that he swallowed. "Quite tasty, really."

"That trick didn't work for my mom, it sure's hell won't work for you."

"Do it for *science*."

I muttered a curse under my breath and picked up my fork. Doug smirked at me around his mouthful of meat bar sandwich. The green stuff tasted a little like turnip greens; Ellis had used a lot of vinegar and tossed in dried shallots, too, which I thought was cheating. I resisted the impulse to ask if Ivan Kelly had just happened to have condiments on him that time he'd got lost in the wilderness.

Instead, I gingerly sampled the fish, and after chewing and swallowing, I said, "Tastes like anchovies, only saltier, oilier. Fishier."

"Nonsense," Ellis said happily. "It's an estuarine fish—the Paleozoic equivalent of catfish."

Picking at my food, I inexorably reduced the volume on my plate. Ellis ate with unabashed gusto. He had finished two big helpings by the time I was down to my last couple of bites. Doug washed down his repast with a beer and left after favoring me with another smirk; to Ellis he said only, "Cook cleans up."

Ellis gave me a big smile, revealing a bit of green stuff stuck on an eyetooth. "Finish up," he said, "there's *dessert*!"

I draw a merciful veil of silence over what followed.

Afterward, I left him in the galley and went on deck. Doug was leaning against the wheelhouse, looking off downriver. "You waiting for a tow?" I said, but he only shook his head. I tried to take up my novel where I'd left off. Ellis appeared after a time and approached me, smiling. The bit of green stuff was still stuck to his smile.

"Well," he said, "was Kelly onto something, or wasn't he?"

I cut off Samuel Butler in mid-tirade and said, "Yes, Kelly was a genius. And you are truly worthy to take up his mantle. Forgive me for having ever doubted it."

"I just meant — since you obviously weren't completely revolted — "

His face had fallen slightly, and in spite of myself I felt I owed him something. "No, I wasn't revolted. In fact, I did manage to clean my plate, so I guess compliments are due to the chef. My compliments, chef. A word of friendly advice, though. Don't go into the catering business when you get back home."

"Okay, so I admit it isn't *fun* food. The point is, you now know you could survive here if you had to — live off the land."

I thought that was still pretty arguable, but all I said was, "Well, let's hope I never have to."

"What's that?"

I became aware, all at once, of a faint drumming sound. It quickly grew louder and resolved itself into the beating of helicopter blades, and I turned to see a Navy machine approaching us — low and fast, purposefully, like a barracuda — from the direction of Stinktown. Ellis saw it at the same moment. He looked stunned. Then he screamed, "Goddammit!" and leaped over the side of the boat. He flailed through the shallow water and scrambled, muddy and trailing algal filaments, onto the bank. He ran a short distance in one direction, then in another, paused to look up at the helicopter, ran several more yards in several more different directions. The helicopter settled to within a foot of the ground, and three bluejackets jumped out and quickly closed on him. Ellis ran in a circle, then stopped suddenly and plopped down on the ground. Even at that distance I could see that he was crying like a baby. The bluejackets scooped him up, not ungently, and half-led, half-dragged him toward the helicopter. Crouching in the door of the helicopter was a young Navy officer and another man, a civilian I vaguely recalled from Stinktown. The bluejackets loaded Ellis into the helicopter, the civilian patted him reassuringly on the arm, then looked our way, smiled, gave us the thumbs-up. I looked around to see Doug acknowledge with a wave, though he wasn't returning the smile. The helicopter rose, turned, pointed itself, and flew away, back toward Stinktown.

I watched until the machine had dwindled to a dot, then went over to Doug and demanded, "Now what the hell was that all about?"

"Ellis was supposed to go home with the rest of his group day before yesterday. He told me he was going upriver to do field work. I thought he was traveling sort of light, but he'd done a good job of faking his authorizations. Anyway, they turned the camp inside out looking for him, climbed all over the headlands. They were about to start dragging the marsh when somebody thought to send out an A.P.B. I got it after dinner last night and radioed back I'd wait here until they came to collect him."

"So he was really going to go off into the wilderness and try to live on slime and bugs." I spread my hands in a gesture of disbelief. "Isn't screening supposed to keep lunatics out of Paleozoic time?"

"Just the obvious ones."

"How obvious do they have to be?" He had no answer for that, so I said, "Well, you might at least've told them to come get him *before* I had to eat goddamn pond scum for lunch."

"S what you get," he said as he turned to go into the wheelhouse, "for making fun of my boatmanship."

Far inland, the river separates into its tributaries. Bands of color mark some of the confluences; the waters rushing down from ancient highlands are relatively clear, those meandering across the peneplain are turbid and brown. And wouldn't you know it, we ran aground on a sand bar Doug swore hadn't been there the trip before. He said he could rock us off, but it would take a little while.

Strangely calm, I nodded and glanced up at the sky. It was almost noon. "While you're rocking," I said, "why don't I whip us up some lunch."

He nodded absently. "Good idea. You know where everything is."

"Yep, pretty much."

I went to the galley and tossed all of Doug's meat bars through a porthole. Then I went looking for Ellis's net and buckets.



British writer Graham Joyce is the author of seven novels, including The Tooth Fairy, Requiem, and Indigo. His latest book, Smoking Poppy, is due out by the time this issue comes off the presses. The novel is set on the borders of Thailand and Myanmar among the opium-growing, spirit-worshipping hill tribes with whom Mr. Joyce lived for some time.

His rare short fiction has appeared mostly in British magazines such as Interzone and New World. Fortunately, a collection entitled Partial Eclipse and Other Stories is due out later this year from Subterranean Press, who also published this story in chapbook form. We're delighted to bring it to you now.

Black Dust

By Graham Joyce

HALF HIDDEN BEHIND A thicket of hawthorn and holly bushes was a second cave. It astonished him to see it there. As a kid Andy had scrambled over every boulder, probed every fissure and crevice, and swung from the exposed roots of every tree clinging to the face of Corley Rocks. Yet here was a new cave, quite unlike the one in which he'd been holed up for the afternoon. After feeling the mild tremor, Andy needed to get home. But something in this new cave called to him.

Unlike the first cave, a mere split in the rock face that had always been there, this one was dome-shaped, with an arched chamber as an entrance. He drew closer. As he squeezed between the hawthorn and prickly holly to get into the cave, it became obvious to him that this second cave went back much deeper. He could see well enough for the first few yards, but after that the cave shadows set hard in a resinous black diamond.

Still it called.

He wanted to move deeper in, but his throat dried and his breathing

came short. He rolled his foot in the blackness. A pebble crunched under his shoe.

There was a tiny light, no bigger than a glow-worm, swinging at the rear of the cave. It flickered and went out. Then it appeared again. The light shimmered, still swinging slightly from left to right. He heard footsteps shuffling toward him, and then there appeared in the gloom a second light, smaller than the first, and nearer the cave floor. The lights were approaching. Then there was a sound like the low growl of an animal, and it made him think of that dog.

That dog, slavering and throwing itself at the fence, chewing the thick wire mesh. A brute of an Alsatian, but the drooling jaws and yellow teeth had Andy convinced it was part wolf. Andy always kept one eye peeled for the dog while the other, of course, was alert for Bryn's father.

Bryn appeared in his socks. "It's all right," he said. "He's not here."

Andy crossed the swarthy yard and removed his shoes at the threshold of the kitchen. Shoes off at the door because of the coal dust. Everyone. The house and yard once belonged to a coal merchant who'd gone bust, and the cinder path leading to Bryn's house was black. The yard was black. The gate was black. The coal dust had even pointed up the cement between the black-red bricks. They had to take off their shoes so as not to trail black dust into the house. Bryn had developed a lazy habit of not bothering to put on his shoes merely to cross the yard, even though his father, with a bunched fist, had once made his ear bleed for this offense.

"Twenty minutes before he gets back."

The boys went through the kitchen. Bryn's mother Jean looked up from her ironing. "Still down there then, your dad."

"Yes," said Andy.

"Twenty-four hours now."

"Yes."

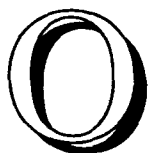
"They got oxygen. They got food to them. They'll get him out." She pressed her iron into a collar and a jet of steam wheezed into the air.

The two boys went upstairs to Bryn's room, where they got the rope, the water bottle, and the tiny brass compass. They didn't want to hang around. Important not to be there when Ike got back off shift. Sometimes when they played table football or lounged in Bryn's bedroom, the door

would open quietly and Bryn's mother would whisper, "He's back. Make yourself scarce." And with that they always would.

Once when Andy awaited Bryn in the kitchen, Ike had come in from work and imposed himself in the doorway, glowering. Andy had felt compelled to look away. Without saying a word to Bryn's mum, the big man slumped in an armchair before the fire, and how the chair-springs had groaned. Ike's skin glowed pink with the scrubbing from a recent shower at the pit, but his body still leaked the odor of coal. A smell like a sulfurous gas, streaming off the man as he stared moodily into the fire. He snorted at the coal-dust irritating his sinuses, hawked and spat into the fire, and this movement released a fresh wave of hostile gas.

Andy had on that occasion feared that even breathing might cause offense. Finally Bryn appeared, beckoning him away. Outside the door they had both vented huge sighs.



OF COURSE THEY didn't need the compass to find their way to Corley Rocks. A matter of a mile and half from the mining estate, Corley Rocks was the highest natural point in the old county of Warwickshire. The ploughed earthworks of an Iron Age encampment moldered on the flat field above an outcrop of red sandstone rock, and from there you could take in the green belt of land all around. To the south stood the two giant wheels of the pit-head winding gear, and beyond that the spires and smoking chimneys of Coventry.

The dog started up again.

"Shut it," Bryn growled as they left the house. "Shut it." It was exactly the way Andy had heard Bryn's old man speak to the dog, half song, half warning, and it was always effective in subduing the animal. Except when Andy or anyone else tried, in which case the dog simply became more inflamed, hurling itself with stupid energy against the mesh fence.

"Do you think that dog is a killer?" Andy said as they walked up the black cinder path away from the house.

"Probably." Bryn hooped the rope across one shoulder. "You carry the water bottle."

The rope was usually for display only. They'd never done any real

climbing at Corley Rocks. Everywhere was accessible by scrambling over the smooth, rounded edges of the sandstone. There was only one place where a rope might be helpful, at the sheer face of the rock above the cave, and Bryn was keen to try it. And it had to be admitted: looped across the torso from left collarbone to right hip, the rope looked a treat.

Andy was envious, because carrying the water bottle was shit. But the rope was Bryn's after all.

They had to pass the entrance to the mine, with its weighbridges and security gates. "Don't think about it," Bryn said. "They've got air. And food. They'll get him out."

It was a hot afternoon in August, and by the time they reached the rocks they were sweating and had drunk all of the water. The cave was merely a fissure, a crack opened in the rock face, but it could be reached by the means of small cavities scooped out of the soft stone, ancient handholds and toegrips. They climbed up and retreated to the back of the cave, welcoming the shade.

Their schoolteacher had said that traces of prehistoric habitation had been found at the cave: flints, stone tools, bones. Someone had even unearthed a huge sabre-tooth, currently being examined by experts at Coventry museum. People had always lived there, it was said, and before that the rocks themselves had been pushed up by fault lines in the vast coal reservoirs under the ground: the very coal that Andy and Bryn's fathers now mined on a daily basis.

Bryn lifted the rope from his shoulders, causing his T-shirt to ride up. Andy saw below Bryn's ribcage the flowering of a huge blue and yellow bruise. It looked like one of the purple-leaf cabbages his own dad grew in the garden. He said nothing. He knew. Bryn knew he knew. And it was none of his business; that's what Andy's mother had said to his father.

"Not your business, Stan, to go getting tangled up in," Nina warned her husband. "Not your business at all."

Andy's father had wanted to go down to Bryn's house to have words. Bryn had turned up one afternoon while Andy's dad dribbled water from the garden hose on his prize-winning leeks. For the old giggle Andy's dad put his finger over the hose and jet-sprayed the two boys. The giggling stopped when the lads stripped off their wet T-shirts.

"Hell, you've been in the wars, haven't you?" Stan said, turning back

to his leeks. Then he did a double-take, looked harder, and laid down the hose. Taking in the multiple bruises on the lad's body, he stepped closer. "Let's have a look at you, son."

Bryn danced away. "Nothing. Fell off a ladder."

"Come here, I said. Stand still. Christ, son! Hell's bells!" He brushed the wounds gently with his callused fingertips. Then he said, very quietly, "Must have been a good few times you fell off that ladder."

"Yeah," Bryn sniffed.

Andy's mother, who'd seen all of this, came out with a clean T-shirt apiece for the lads. Stan was already halfway down the path. She chased after him. "You're not going down there. Not your business!"

Stan had himself once clouted Andy with a closed fist, but only once, and some years ago. Not a single day had passed when he hadn't regretted it. "I'll be back sharpish."

"You're not going down there!"

Stan pulled up short. "I said I'll be back sharp," he whispered in a way that settled the argument. Andy's mum returned to the back garden, where the boys had their heads down and hose was still dribbling water onto the leek-bed.

WITH THE DOG going berserk behind the mesh fence Stan had knocked on the door and had taken a step back. It was some moments before Ike Thompson appeared blinking in the doorway, puff-eyed, looking like he'd just been disturbed from a nap. His eyes were lined with coal-dust like a woman's mascara. He sniffed. "Stan," he said.

"A word in the yard, Ike?" Stan turned his back and walked into the open expanse of the disused coal merchant's yard.

Ike shuffled in the doorway, slipped on his boots without lacing them, and followed Stan across the yard.

The men knew each other well enough. They'd mined the same districts, notably the 42s and the 56s; they nodded to each other whenever their paths crossed; they'd even once been part of the same Mine Rescue Team; and they knew that their boys were good pals. They just didn't like each other.

The two miners stood in the cinder-black yard at a distance of about

five paces. The dog was barking mad, flinging itself at the fence. "Your Bryn's up at our house just now."

Ike was a big man. His grizzled face bore the blue signature scars of coal mining, like someone had scribbled on his face with a ballpoint pen. He stood a head taller than Stan. But Stan was trunk-necked with a barrel of a chest and muscle packed like coiled wire. He had his own mining scar, a blue and white star right in the middle of his forehead, like a bullet-wound.

Ike lifted a hand to his mouth, squeezing his bottom lip between a coal-ingrained thumb and a coal-ingrained forefinger. "Yup."

"Says he fell off of a ladder."

Ike let his hand drop now he knew what this was about. He glanced to the side, and then back at Stan. "Yup."

The Alsatian barked, and slavered, and seemed to try to chew its way through the mesh fence. "He won't be falling off that ladder again, now will he, Ike?"

Ike turned to the dog, and in a low, throaty voice, almost a hiss, said, "Shut iiiiiiiiiittttttttt." The dog lowered its head and crept back into its kennel. "That it?" said Ike.

"That's about it."

"Right. You can go now."

"Happen I will go. But if that lad should fall off another ladder, then I'll come down here again. And we'll have another talk. More serious."

"Oh aye?"

"Too right, we will. Too right."

The two men stood off each other for another minute. Then Stan said, "I'll be seeing you, Ike."

Stan retraced his steps along the cinder path. He felt Ike's gaze drilling into him at every step.

"Stop thinking about it," Bryn said. "They'll get him out. My old man will get him out."

Andy knew they would get his dad out all right. He just wished everyone would stop telling him. He hadn't been allowed to go up to the pit-head, where the wives and grown-up sons and daughters and the rescue teams and the camera crews all congregated, waiting. It had been twenty-fours hours since a roof had collapsed half a mile underground, trapping

seven miners, one of whom was Stan. The rescue teams had made an early breakthrough, piping air and passing food through to the trapped men, but the rescue efforts had hit a snag when a second roof-fall had threatened. Ike was on one of the rescue teams.

"They're right under here," Bryn said. "Right under this spot."

"How do you know that?"

"My old man told me. He said the seam runs north and under these rocks."

Andy thought about his own dad half a mile directly below him, waiting.

"You're not *crying* are you?" Bryn said. "Not *crying*."

"Dust in my eye. Dust." Andy's fingers found a flake of red stone. He flung it from the back of the cave into the crack of light, and it dropped, skittering down the slope. "Anyway you wouldn't care if anything happened to your old man."

Andy wished he hadn't said that. Bryn started whipping the end of his rope. "He might be a shit but at least he...."

"At least he what?"

"Nah. Come on. Let's climb the Edge."

The boys scrambled out of the cave and walked up to an outcrop of red stone known as the Witch's Face. Bryn hoisted himself over the chin and nose of the Face and wanted to use the rope to get Andy up. Andy objected on grounds of pointlessness. From there they proceeded to the Edge, a cliff overhang directly above the cave.

At least he what? Andy thought as they clambered up the steep sandstone slopes, between ragged clumps of hawthorn and holly. One day Stan had brought home a second-hand guitar. Andy had pestered Stan for this guitar, but when it arrived he soon found out that the strings cut his fingers to shreds. He'd taken the guitar down to Bryn's house, and he was exhibiting it to Bryn when Ike appeared unexpectedly, standing in the kitchen doorway, sniffing back coal-dust. His eyes fell on the guitar.

Ike walked across the kitchen without removing his boots, gently lifting the guitar from the lad. "What you got here then, lovely boy? Let's have a look, then."

Ike sat, effeminately crossed his legs, positioned the guitar across his thigh, and gently thumbed the strings. He played a chord or two and the

dog in the yard howled. Ike laughed. "Hear that?" He strummed a few more chords and then picked out a tune. "Christ, these strings stand too high off the frets. You'll never play this, lovely boy. Nice tone, but it's a piece of rubbish."

"My dad got it for me," Andy said, meaning to sound defensive.

Ike laid the guitar down. "Come on lads, get in the car."

"Where you going?" Jean had protested.

"Get in the car, boys!"

Where they went, in Ike's beat-up old Ford Zephyr, was Chaplin's music store. Ike spent most of the journey explaining to Andy how he used to have a guitar — two guitars, even — but when Bryn and his sister had come along, why, there was no time, no bloody time to play them, and he'd always regretted selling the instruments, and now he was going to put that right. He talked like that all the way round the music shop, non-stop; he insulted the shop manager; tried out every second-hand guitar in the store; crooned passionately to other customers; purchased right off two decent instruments for the boys; and had a twenty-minute bash on a Premiere Drum Kit before leaving.

"Where's the swining money coming for those, then?" Jean shouted when they got back.

Ike was all sweetness. He squeezed his wife and kissed her angry mouth. "Music before butter," he said. "Remember that, lovely boys. Music before butter."

Stan and Nina had something to say about it, too. They made Andy take his guitar back. Stan went with him. Stan and Andy stood in the kitchen, with their shoes on this time.

"Why can't I buy the lads an instrument apiece?" Ike said. "Why can't I?"

"It's too generous," Stan said.

"Rubbish. How's that anybody's concern but mine?"

"It's my swining-well concern, too," said Jean. "Where's the money coming from?"

The lads watched all this intently. "Boys, sod off into the other room, will you?" Stan said. Bryn and Andy filed out, both still clutching the new guitars by the necks, and closed the door behind them. "Look, Ike, you can't make up for things by throwing money at them."

"What's that? You've lost me."

"The guitars. You can't make other things right."

Ike suddenly understood Stan's point. His face clouded. "I see. I see what this is about, and I don't like it. Tell me, how does one thing touch the other?"

"I'm just saying."

"How the bloody hell does one thing touch the other? If I want to buy the boys instruments apiece, I buy the bloody instruments apiece! Christ, man!"

Stan was man enough to sense he might have made a mistake. "I don't know, Ike, it's too much."

But Ike had soured now. He called the boys back, and while he waited for them, he said, "Your lad can carry his guitar home with him or I'll take it in the yard and split it into matchwood, now!"

"He will, as well," Jean put in.

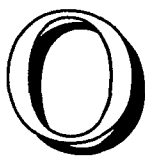
Stan sighed. "Come on," he said to the bewildered Andy. "Bring your guitar."

Ike followed them out. The dog growled from its kennel but Ike silenced it with a thunderous look. "One thing does not touch another," he said, almost in a whisper. "You should know that, Stan. One thing does not touch another."

"Happen."

They'd not gone twelve yards before Ike softly called to Andy. "Practice every day, mind," he said softly, and with a terrifying squint to his eye. "Practice every day."

"I will," said Andy.



ON THE TOP of the Edge Bryn fumbled with the rope, securing a Pig's Ear knot as he looped it round a spindly clump of rooted hawthorn. Andy was supposed then to loop the rope around his own waist while Bryn lowered himself over the Edge, preparing to descend to the cave that way — a mere matter of nine or ten feet below the lip of the Edge.

Bryn duly disappeared over the lip, negotiating toeholds and finger-grips, grunting occasionally and chattering happily. Andy meanwhile stood with his hands in his pockets, anxiously gazing across at the twin

wheels of the pit-head winding gear, wondering how the rescue was proceeding. It was possible to superimpose on the landscape the giant ghost of an old lady crouched at those black wheels, spinning away with some dark and concealed purpose. And it was while Andy gazed across the fields to the distant mineworks that he heard a yelp and felt the rope tighten round his waist.

Andy grabbed the branch of a nearby tree. The rope jagged against the feeble hawthorn, lifting it out by its roots. Bryn yelped again as the rope dropped him another six feet. Then the hawthorn root popped out of the sandy soil, like a pulled tooth. The rope whiplashed at Andy, turning him in a complete circle, losing its purchase on his body. The bush lashed at Andy's face as it went past him. It snagged on two fingers of exposed tree-root, and Bryn was dumped another six feet. Then the bush tore free and whistled as it went over the Edge.

Andy didn't stop to look over. Instead he hurried down past the Witch's Face and round to the slope in front of the cave, where Bryn lay in a crumpled heap. Blood bubbled at the corner of his mouth.

"Yawlright?" Andy said.

"Of course I'm not all right."

"You're all right."

Bryn groaned. He'd been badly winded by the fall, and he'd scraped his hands and his knees. He'd also bitten his tongue, which accounted for the blood. In the end he'd fallen no more than about twelve feet, and had bounced down the sandstone slope beneath the cave mouth. He sat up, holding his head.

"Hey," said Andy. "*Not crying* are you."

"You shit. Why didn't you hold on to me?"

"You must be joking. You were gone before I knew it."

"Useless. You're useless." Bryn was on his feet.

"It was your stupid idea. Tying the rope to that bush. Stupid. Where are you going?"

"I'm going home."

"Wait. I'll come with you."

"Sod off."

Bryn shrugged off his friend's advances and limped away. Within a minute he was out of sight. "Wasn't my fault," Andy shouted. He slumped

onto the slope beneath the cave, knowing he should have gone home with Bryn. While Andy's mother was spending every anxious moment waiting at the pit-head for news of the rescue, Bryn's mother had told him to come for tea. Just as he'd done the previous night, munching on sardine sandwiches when Ike had turned up.

Ike had broken shifts to be part of the rescue team. He'd stood in the doorway, kicking his boots off, all-in. He drew a chair to the table where the boys sat, and without a word to anyone laid his head down by the plates and the butter, leaking the odor of coal and exhaustion. The boys munched on their sandwiches, looking at him. After a while Jean placed a steaming mug of tea on the table and Ike lifted his head. He blinked sleepily at the boys.

"Well," Jean had said.

"Not much," Ike said. He slurped his tea noisily. Then he turned to Andy. "Thing is, lovely boy, he's in a corner with the other blokes and the ceiling is pressed down on 'em, see. And we can't get."

A flat, opened sardine can lay on the table, next to the butter. He picked up the can. "See how you get this bit of fish stuck in the corner and you can't get your knife into it? Well, that bit of sardine's your dad. In there, look? And the top of this tin is the roof come down on him. Now if we pull out what's holding up the roof, see?" He pressed down a huge, coal-ingrained thumb, crumpling the flimsy metal sheet of the sardine can. Tomato sauce and fish oil bubbled around the scythed edges of the can. "Well. There you are."

Ike carefully replaced the sardine can next to the butter. "Don't you worry, lovely boy. Ike will get him out." Then he put his head back on the table and closed his eyes.

Jean had made a silent gesture that they should leave the table.

Recalling all of this, Andy felt a sob break free deep in his chest and force its way into his throat. He wiped his eyes and tossed another pebble down the sandstone slope. There was nothing he could do. They wouldn't let him wait up at the pit-head and there was no one at home.

Then the ground shook. Very slightly. The mild tremor made him grab at the earth, and he thought he heard a muffled thump. Just for a second he'd felt the shock of earth dislodging, and he knew he hadn't

imagined it because a couple of tiny pebbles broke loose from the cave and went bouncing down the slope. He wondered if it had anything to do with the pit rescue.

He decided to hurry home. He got up and picked his way down the slope, barely keeping his footing. He knew that if he went back up to the Edge he could cut across fields and get home faster. His hands trembled. He was clambering between boulders, over the exposed roots of trees, when he stumbled. That's when he saw the second cave.

INSIDE THE CAVE, the dog-like growl subsided. Then it came again, only this time it sounded like a man trying to clear his throat of coal-dust. The two tiny lights continued to swing from side to side. Another distressed throaty growl made Andy want to get out.

But as the lights floated toward him out of the gloom he recognized the bowl of a miner's helmet. The upper light was a helmet lamp. A miner, face blackened with coal-dust, approached him from the dark end of the cave. Hanging from the miner's belt was a Davey lamp, with its tiny flame alive.

The miner stopped, and leaned against the wall. Breathing heavily, he tried to clear his throat again. He was struggling. "Hello Andy. Where's my lovely boy, then?"

Ike blinked at him in the darkness, his face caked with sweat and black dust. All Andy could see of his features were his teeth and the whites of his eyes. Ike had a rope looped over his shoulder; identical to the one he and Bryn had played with earlier. "Bryn went home."

Ike seemed confused. He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the cave wall. Ike was breathing asthmatically. He seemed to have trouble getting his words out. "Oh. Came to have a word with him, I did. See."

Now Andy could see and hear industrious activity taking place deeper in the cave behind Ike. He tried to look beyond the miner. "Where's my Dad?"

"Your old man's all right. I got him out." Ike unhooked the rope from his shoulder and flung it to the cave entrance. "Told you I would."

Andy tried to push past Ike, to get to his Dad. "Let me through."

Ike stopped him. Struggling to draw himself up to his full height, he

placed a big blackened paw on Andy's shoulder. "No, no, no. That's not for you back there. Nothing to concern you back there. I just came to see my lovely boy. But you say he's not here, then?"

"No. He went home."

Ike slowly lifted a sooty hand to wipe back the sweat from his brow. Even in the darkness Andy could see it bubbling black and coursing dust into Ike's eyes. He was out of breath. "Tell him I came. Now you run along home, son. Go and see your old man." Andy nodded as the miner turned and retreated, with slow heavy steps, the lamp swinging at his side, deeper into the blackness of the cave. "And tell your old man," Ike called softly.

"Tell him what?"

"Just tell him."

Andy escaped from the cave into the bright summer light. There, lying on the floor was the rope Ike had flung at the cave entrance. Andy picked it up. It was black from the coal, and the gritty dust immediately transferred itself to the boy's hands. He was already blackened from the paw print Ike had left on his shirt, so he hooked the rope over his shoulder and hastened home.

When Andy persuaded the gatekeeper to let him through to the pit-head, he found his mother there, and his father. Stan had already been brought up with the other rescued men. They were all in good shape, but there was no celebration and no rejoicing because one of the rescue team had been killed in the effort of getting the men out.

Andy didn't see Bryn for some weeks afterward. His mother had taken him, along with his sister, to stay with her family in Wales. When Bryn did return Andy tried to pass on the message Ike had given him.

"What?"

"He came looking for you. Up at the rocks. Your old man."

"What?"

"He left the rope. Do you want it? The rope?"

Bryn wrinkled his nose in contempt. "No."

"But you must."

"Shut it, will you? Shut it."

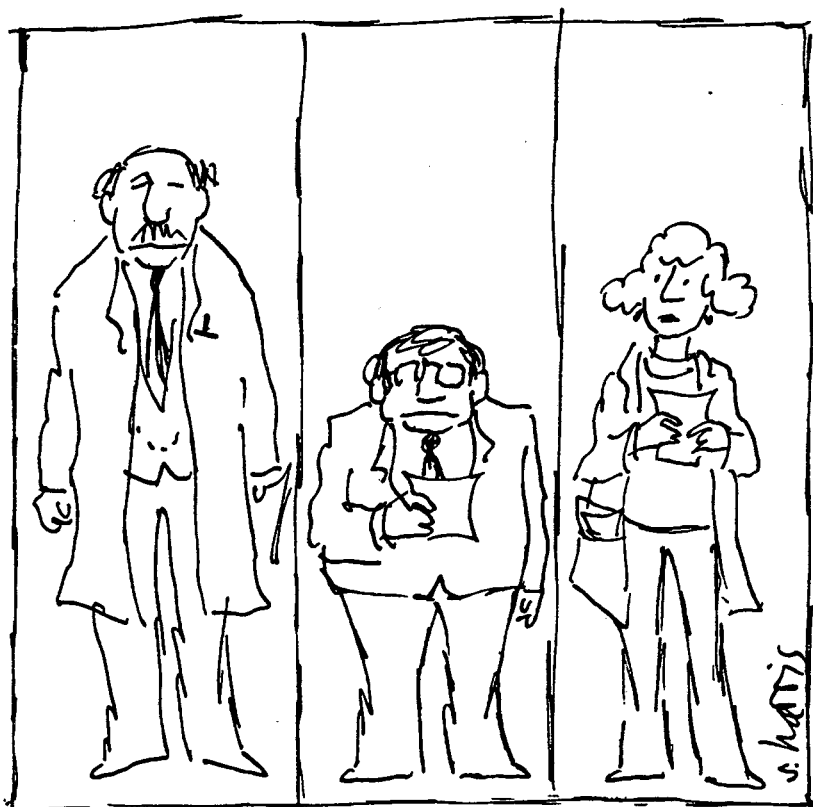
Eventually, Bryn and his mother and sister moved permanently to Wales.

Andy never said anything about it to his own father. One afternoon he said to Stan, "So Bryn's dad saved your life then, didn't he?"

"That's what they say, son. That's what they say."

That was the closest they ever got to discussing the matter.

More than once Andy went back up to Corley Rocks to try to find the second cave. He looked hard for it. He never did find it. Though he did have the rope. He hung it on a nail in the garden shed, where it remained untouched for many years, black with coal-dust. ¶



BELIEVES UNIVERSE
IS EXPANDING

BELIEVES UNIVERSE
IS CONTRACTING

BELIEVES UNIVERSE
IS STABLE



FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

THE GHOST AND MS. KIDMAN

SOME YEARS back I was approached by a TV producer who offered to pay me what then seemed decent money to come up with some story ideas for a hit cop series. He said they were tired of doing stories centering on coke dealers and wanted to take the show in a new direction. I spent a couple of afternoons working up a number of non-drug-oriented plots, all of which the man said he loved. He paid me and gushed about how eager he was to get the ideas into script. Then he went out and shot twenty-two shows about coke dealers for the new season.

Akin to this is the Hollywood tradition of bringing in foreign directors to create a fresh look for an old idea or a sequel. What generally happens in this circumstance is that the director is hamstrung with a

horrible script, valiantly tries to give the project a fresh take, and is thwarted at every turn by the producers who hired him. Their attitude, you see, has changed. They now are concerned that this interloper will screw up their cash cow and often once the film has been finished, the producers — most of whom are blessed with the creative sensibilities of a rutabaga — will reedit the picture themselves, confident that their commercial genius will compensate for a lack of talent and craftsmanship. Recent Hollywood history is strewn with mutant horrors engendered by such unholy unions. For instance, Lee Tamahori (*Once Were Warriors*) went over the regrettable *Mulholland Falls*; Jean-Pierre Jeunet (*Delicatessen*) got screen credit but should not be blamed for the franchise-killing *Alien 4*; Jocelyn Moorhouse (*Proof*) wound up

muffled by *How to Make an American Quilt*; P. J. Hogan went from the vitality of *Muriel's Wedding* to the malaise of *My Best Friend's Wedding*; Bruno Barreto (*Doña Flor and Her Two Husbands*) was defeated by *One Tough Cop* starring Stephen Baldwin; John Woo, Ringo Lam, and Tsui Hark, the creator of *Chinese Ghost Story*, were all saddled with awful pictures featuring the Muscles from Brussels, Jean Claude Van Damme.... To avoid adding their names to what has become a long and woeful list, some European directors who want to achieve an American success have begun staying at home and shooting their movies in English, hoping that this way they will preserve their artistic integrity. But there is a further pitfall they fail to take into account — distributors frequently elect to recut foreign films themselves, sometimes for no other reason than the film is a bit long for their tastes, and they have been known on occasion to make their cuts by simply removing a reel. According to reliable sources, it is into this pit that Alejandro Amenabar's *The Others* appears to have fallen.

Ghost stories have had a minor cinematic renaissance in the United States since the runaway success of

The Sixth Sense, and probably will continue to do so because of the subsequent good box office performance of Robert Zemeckis's *What Lies Beneath*, which — though it ranks a couple of notches above Bill Cosby's *Ghost Dad* — barely caused a quiver in the needle on my Mediocre-Meter. It is a trend that does not promise great movies — Hollywood will milk it dry by process of repetition and imitation, until the trend will dissipate in a flurry of horrid remakes. One imagines the puerile terrors of a Jennifer Love Hewitt version of *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* or two hours passed under the insipid spell of Matt Damon's *Harvey*. But even if the substance of one film resonates with that of another, it is worth our notice when a talented director chooses to take on such a project. Alejandro Amenabar burst onto the scene with the outstanding Spanish sf thriller *Open Your Eyes*, one of the best science fiction films in recent years (granted, this is not saying very much, but *Eyes* is well worth a viewing, and far preferable, I would imagine, to the Hollywood remake coming this fall, *Vanilla Sky*, which stars the ineluctable Tom Cruise). The source material for his current film is Henry James's novella of psychological ambiguity and — perhaps —

ghosts, "The Turn of the Screw," which Jack Clayton turned into an excellent picture back in the '60s: *The Innocents*, starring Deborah Kerr. In *The Others*, Amenabar eschews ambiguity and steps away from the source material, attempting to make what is essentially a variant version of *The Sixth Sense*. Shortly after the end of World War II, Grace (Nicole Kidman), a young wife whose husband (Christopher Eccleston) is presumed dead, missing in action, is kept busy raising her two children in a lonely fogbound house on the Isle of Jersey. The children, Nicholas and Anne, have — we are told — an allergy to light which requires that the windows be curtained during the day. The manor's servants have apparently fled, and as the film opens, their replacements — the housekeeper and nanny, Mrs. Mills (Fionnula Flanagan), her mute assistant Lydia, and Mr. Tuttle, the gardener — begin their term of employment. It soon becomes clear that there is something sinister about the new servants, and further, that something sinister is occupying the house. Ghosts...at least so we are led to believe. Grace is initially resistant to the idea of ghosts but Anne claims to have seen them and creates a drawing of

the family she believes is haunting the manor: mom, dad, son, and granny. But as the thumpings, slammed doors, mysterious footsteps, midnight piano recitals, and various other disturbing occurrences multiply, Grace becomes a believer. Terrified, she undertakes a trip to town to seek counsel from a priest, but before she can get very far from the house, she spies her husband emerging from the fog — he is apparently just now returning from the war and is traumatized by his experiences. This causes Grace to put her concerns aside and to return with her husband to the manor. But her happiness is short-lived, for following a brief and unsettling reunion, the husband wanders off again, saying that he must return to the front.

By this point in the film, it is obvious that the new servants are somehow involved with all the supernatural doings, and what is really going on should be apparent to everyone, especially if you have seen *The Sixth Sense*. Thus when the ending arrives, it falls rather flat. This is not to say that the movie is an absolute failure. Amenabar is a talented director and the film contains a number of genuine frights, establishes an unnerving depth of suspense, and is

potently atmospheric. His framing of Kidman is especially notable. For much of the film, the camera appears to be sculpting her out of the gloom and shadow, lighting her porcelain features so that at times her face has the aspect of a cameo emerging from dark water, drawing to our attention her delicate and agitated facial gestures, flared nostrils, lip quivers, nervous tremors, and so forth, literally painting a portrait in time of a woman who is tightly wound, close to madness, and who — so her daughter claims — has had a psychotic episode in the recent past. Kidman's features are not so expressive as those of some other actresses (Emily Watson being the current heavyweight champion in this regard), and she does not offer the magnitude of talent that Deborah Kerr brought to the central role in *The Innocents*. Nonetheless, her relative woodenness works to the film's advantage, being apropos to Grace's type, a fragile upper-class British wife, and if Kidman does not exactly light up the screen, she photographs beautifully and is sufficiently skilled to be convincing.

Ultimately, perhaps because we have watched *The Sixth Sense* and therefore pick up on the clues more readily than otherwise we might,

The Others does not surprise us. But as I've suggested, there may be more pertinent reasons for the film's flatness than what might seem on first glance to be poor directorial choices. The film contains a number of cuts that do not look to be the work of a professional, sudden jumps and shifts of scene that are scarcely commensurate with Amenabar's technical facility and eye. There are also several logical flaws and unexplained events that seem equally un-Amenabarlike. His previous movies have been logically tight and smoothly edited, and it's difficult to believe that he would mutilate his own film to the extent demonstrated by the print I watched. Since *The Others* checks in at about two hours, and since certain distributors have a reputation (deserved or not, one can only surmise) for hacking up films in order to fit them into two-hour slots, thereby enabling more shows per day, which translates into more money...given all that, it's not inconceivable that we in the United States haven't seen the entirety of Amenabar's film. This would explain a great deal, including why what is little more than a cameo appearance by Christopher Eccleston, one of Britain's most accomplished actors, merits second-listing

in the credits. The missing material may well have provided emotional information or story details that would have made the ending feel less truncated and more satisfying, but we won't know that for certain until the Spanish version of the film is released on DVD and video.

That this sort of butchery has been done previously and frequently should not be in question. In the old days before the spread of mass culture, it was a common practice for unscrupulous filmmakers to hack up old films to accord with market trends and redistribute them under different names. Today, though the butchery is less obvious, similar practices continue. For instance, I am convinced that Stanley's Kubrick's last film, *Eyes Wide Shut*, widely trumpeted to be Kubrick's final edit, was mucked with by an idiot wearing moon-glasses and listening to Britney Spears on a Walkman. Anyone who has paid close attention to Kubrick's other films knows he would never have made such clumsy scene cuts as are evidenced by the print that was circulated in American theaters. Had Kubrick lived to oversee its release, *Eyes Wide Shut* would surely not have been a great picture, but it would

have been internally consistent — all Kubrick's scripts were models of internal consistency. Whoever it was who hacked up *Eyes Wide Shut* may be in question, but I could easily come up with a list of films edited by distributors with no regard for quality that would be far longer than this column. What astonishes me is not that the practice goes unnoticed by the public, but rather that it has been ignored by and so given the tacit blessing of the critical press. It would seem that these tastemakers, who know what is happening, might feel compelled, if not by conscience, then by professional ethics, to report on the practice, which must be at odds with — if not completely contrary to — at least some minor copyright and/or consumer regulation. But no. Musty concerns such as journalistic integrity and an artist's right to determine the presentation of his or her intellectual property do not, apparently, serve them.

I have seen *The Others* reviewed as being derivative of *The Sixth Sense*, but while there are similarities between the two movies, I find this dismissal myopic and simplistic. Amenabar is a director with his own peculiar intelligence and style. I seriously doubt he set

out to ape *The Sixth Sense*. It is obvious that he did not intend a big surprise ending—he offers so many clues to the mystery, it's evident that he wanted the audience in on the secret by the movie's midpoint so they could observe what he was really trying to do. I believe the film must have been re-edited by an incompetent who wanted to cut the running time and shape the picture so it more closely resembled *The Sixth Sense*: this would be perfectly in keeping with the exercise of

"commercial instincts." There are solid indicators that Amenabar intended to make a film that would illuminate the process by which a ghost might be created, and to do so he needed to paint a character study of a ghost; and he decided that the best way to achieve both ends would be to depict a ghost who comes to a gradual recognition of her condition. The sad thing is that, very likely, most of his audience will never know whether or not he succeeded. ♪

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Most readers will recognize this byline as belonging to the author of many xenolinguist stories, including "Reading the Bones," which Ms. Finch is currently expanding into a novel. She has managed somehow to make time for a few new stories, however, including this look at one of the eternal themes: how do we live with the results of the decisions we make in our lives?

Forkpoints

By Sheila Finch

THE BACKSTAGE MAZE AT the New Globe InterAct PlayHouse reeked of cannabis when Cass arrived, in spite of the stage manager's recent lecture about what smoke did to the delicate Sonytronic rig. The master electrician had an Aiwa negative ion pulsar going over by the lightboard in the control room. Someone had draped a plastic Christmas wreath over the fire extinguisher next to the board.

The electrician looked up. "How's it going?"

"Not my favorite time of year."

"And Jamie?"

She shrugged.

The PlayHouse, a large, rambling, done-over art deco mansion just off Hollywood Boulevard, was almost freezing. Computers needed it cold; InterActors didn't count for much. Amazing somebody hadn't already tried to replace them with robots, she thought. Cassandra Romano, an incredibly realistic simulation of a human being. Maybe not so realistic this time of year.

She headed down a dark corridor to Wardrobe. Myron Dahlberg, the director, wanted her in a chunky tweed suit for the first act, huge padded shoulders, ugly fur collar, the jacket belted army-style over a skirt with inverted pleats, and a black fur helmet on top. Much of the previous century glorified flat, skinny women, and Cass was neither anymore.

Six months ago, he'd introduced her to Noreen Vincenza, pouty, redheaded and ten-years-younger, Cass's understudy. One month ago, he'd added insult to damage by lecturing Cass on her slipping audience appeal, measured each week in the box office receipts by the number of people willing to pay to help her character make decisions.

This morning the insect-squeaking voice of her bathroom scale had announced the addition of another kilo to stuff into the costume.

Forkpoint. Why not quit now?

Because of Jamie, that was why not.

It had started with the parade down Colorado Boulevard in Pasadena, a sunny, rose-scented December day ten years into a new century. A hero's welcome home, the last of a dozen extravagant cavalcades across the country. Johnny in the back seat of the convertible, champagne glass in one hand. Later Cass would learn how much the International Space Agency hated that champagne glass, and how they would hide behind it.

But for now, Johnny Romano was the first astronaut to set foot on an asteroid, and that counted for something. Cass could never remember which one it had been.

Seeing her face in the crowd, Johnny stopped his driver and pulled her aboard. "Marry me!" he shouted in her ear as the parade passed the Norton Simon Museum. His fingers tangled in her long, blonde hair. He was so drunk. "Why not?" she said, because his face had been on the trivid for days, and hadn't she watched him play high school football? As for Johnny's motive, she didn't want to know. Stage actresses never had too many options.

Yet there had been choices. A show in Topeka, a little theater production in Des Moines. Shut out now by the glamour spotlight of Johnny's triumphal tour, abandoned in that moment under the flags, the rose petals and the cheers. And the thought of what it could do for her career. They were a media creation: *Starman Snags Sexy Starlet!*

ISA put a more conservative spin on it: high school sweethearts.

They married in Hollywood and honeymooned in Las Vegas. Where she sat up all night for the first time, cradling him in her arms while he writhed in silent nightmares. The headaches and nausea started six months after that. Both of them began to wonder what they'd done.

But by then she was already pregnant with Jamie.

"All right!" The stage manager shouted. "Theme One, Scene Three, people. Take your places, please!"

She took the east backstage maze — actually a staircase off-limits to the audience — down to the "parlour" of the prime minister's house in London where she did the scene in *V Stands for Victory*. Cameron Gordon, male lead, winked as she came through the cast door; he fiddled with the large headset used in rehearsal, adjusting reception.

She'd been an InterActor for almost five years, but she still got the shivers walking the mazes behind the rooms the audience saw. She was alive here. Theater was in her blood, more real than her life outside its doors.

A tech eased past, checking out electronics for the special effects. The New Globe was state of the art — First of its kind — Revolutionizing the field — Her agent's words played in her memory. It had imitators, but it was still the best for now. She was lucky to be working at all after allowing the media to forget her.

Noreen was standing by a mahogany occasional table, tea tray in hand. She was at least twenty pounds lighter than Cass but still managed to look as if she was about to split the seams of the skimpy parlor-maid's outfit. Noreen was supposed to be a minor character with limited forkpoint options, but judging by the number of moves she managed to squeeze out of the peanut gallery's cheapie say-sos, Cass knew Noreen of the pouty lips thought she was the star.

"*Cassandra?*" Myron's voice sounded as if it was coming over a child's tin-can telephone. "*Darling, are you on this planet or orbiting? For the third time — Patch in!*"

Cameron ran a comb through graying hair. He was sitting in the big wingback chair beside a fireplace, watching Noreen. Cass sat down opposite him on the blue and white striped sofa. The lights came up.

"*Curtain*," the stage manager's voice said in her ear.

Funny how the old terms persisted, she thought. Pretty soon the younger generation of InterActors wouldn't even know what "curtain" and "backstage" used to refer to.

Cameron, as Winston Churchill, accepted a cup of tea from Noreen. "Thank you, Alice. That'll be all."

Noreen/Alice gave a whimsical half-curtsey that the dramatist had yelled about a couple of times but Myron had defended on the grounds that what audiences didn't know about English manners in 1939 would fill a book. She tucked the empty tea tray under her arm.

Cass's dummy-line came next. "Mr. Churchill, I must say that I fail to understand — "

"Miss Faversham." Cameron groped for a second, didn't find what he was seeking, then mimed picking up and lighting a cigar. "I have already done all the explaining I intend to do."

Once a week, the cast went over the skeleplay to make sure they hadn't wandered too far from the original hardline. It wasn't just the casual changes, the little bits of improv — action or dialogue, spontaneous one night but gradually solidifying — that tugged the skele off course. Sometimes the real cognoscenti, saying-so for a few crucial roles that they bought into several nights in a row, could wreck the cast's attempts to follow the hardline. Theatrical dilettantes swapped notes, prepared strategy, making a point of working through the most bizarre choices. This was tough on InterActors, but exhilarating if they were good at blending dummy-lines with improv.

Noreen/Alice was supposed to leave the room — this wasn't a forkpoint — but she was dawdling around today trailing a faint, musky perfume. It put Cass off a fraction of a second.

"You are truly an arrogant man!"

The scene coach scolded in her ear: "*You're picking up late, Cass.*"

A play had a life of its own, and it changed over a period of several performances. Once InterActors really got into improv to fit a good say-so, they tended to add in those possibilities the next time as if they were part of the hardline. And when that happened, the writers' union squawked if they didn't track it back inside contract limits. Eventually the cast might get to a point where there was no way out.

"London is full of well-bred, sensitive young ladies, Miss Faversham," Cameron delivered Churchill's lines. "Any one of them would seize this chance."

Cass stood up, careful to turn her face toward the north wall where the audience who'd chosen to say-so for Bertha Faversham would stand later. Miss Faversham was indecisive, adjusting the abominable fur hat.

"Well, Miss Faversham? What is your decision?"

Forkpoint.

ISA specialists couldn't find the cause of Johnny's symptoms. "Stress of re-entry," one suggested. "Psychological effect," another wrote. It had been a rough trip. But that was classified. The agency didn't blame Johnny for feeling less than his normal self for a while. Later Cass saw the irony in this. At the time she believed she was in love.

The prospect of fatherhood seemed to rally him. The headaches and the nausea receded. But not the bad dreams. He refused to talk about them, even to Cass.

Then the amnio sent up warning flares, and the ultrasound was indecisive, and the doctor frowned when he spoke to her.

Cass brought Johnny the news at sunset. He was sitting on the balcony of their condo on Balboa Island where the scent of roses in the courtyard was as heady as champagne. He'd taken to sitting for hours like this, staring into space.

ISA wondered when he was coming back to work. They spoke of choices, new technology. Biochip implants. Virtual orbiting. The best way to use his experience and knowledge. They were concerned about the enormous sums of money that had gone into training him. Johnny ignored them.

"The doc thinks I should abort." All the way home Cass had practiced how to say this, finally deciding on cold words that cut cleanest.

Johnny didn't turn his head to look at her. She studied the black curls lying unkempt on the back of his neck.

"No."

"There's something wrong with it, Johnny."

"No!"

He did turn to her then, his face full of nightmares, and she dropped

to her knees beside him, her hands raised to cradle his face. In that moment, perhaps she did truly love him.

"We could try again later — "

In answer, his hands made an obscene gesture at his crotch. "Before these fall off, you think?"

His voice was high, bordering on hysteria. Cass had seen his hands move that way in his sleep, a pathetic warding off of things with no name, dark things with no shape that inhabited the icy sweep of the outer solar system. Things he believed had destroyed his manhood. Cass didn't believe in them because she didn't understand anything about his life in space. But she believed she loved him.

"All right. We'll take the chance," she said.

Jamie was born five months later, premature, underweight, a tiny white pearl of a child with eyes as black as space.

He never cried, even at the moment of first breath.

IN AN ACTUAL performance, the say-sos who'd paid to influence the Bertha Faversham character would signal their choice of two alternatives by pressing a button on their little handheld transmitters. Option A meant Bertha stayed; Option B meant she valued her dignity (and her chastity) and walked. The winning decision would light up on the board in the control room, and then the tracker's job was to relay it as fast as possible to the cast so there was no delay in the scene.

"Option A." Myron picked one today for practice.

She sat down again. Now she went into Bertha's dummy-lines that would lead to her becoming Churchill's mistress, and the scene played out until the next fork. If he'd said "B," she would have delivered a speech about the purity of English womanhood and stalked off stage. And then she'd have been in line for several scenes where she actively worked against Churchill. Ultimately, the play would finish very nearly in the same place, but it would arrive there by different routes.

"Very well, Mr. Churchill. Tell me what you expect of me."

She ran through her scene without giving it much thought. She always found it harder to get into her part in these dry run-throughs. Improv gave the play fire, the excitement of outfoxing some particularly

cunning say-sos and getting where she was supposed to be going in the hardline without detracking the entire play. Without the life breathed into it by the InterActors, the skele, the play as written, seemed dead.

At regular intervals the tracker updated them on what had been happening in the two major scenes that played at the same time as theirs but in other rooms of the house, as well as the little bits of business that went on in the pantry and the upstairs hall. Even walk-ons could skew this play if they gave it half a try. One night, some little bastard playing a delivery boy from the local baker had a cheering section from his former high-school drama class primed to twist his one say-so into a major disaster —

"Cassandra!" Myron screeched in her ear. *"What's the matter with you today, darling? Are you having your period? Pick up the tempo for Chrissakes!"*

She imagined him squatting like a spider in the middle of his control room web, peering at three screens in turn and listening to multi-tracks of dialogue.

She took a breath. *"IdotypingMr.ChurchillbutIdon'tmaketea — "*

"Don't overdo it, Cass, there's a good girl," the scene coach said mildly.

Somehow she got through the rest of the rehearsal without incurring Myron's wrath again.

Afterwards, the cast stood around drinking java, telling plans for the upcoming holidays. Noreen was cooing at Myron, working on him. Cass saw her hold on the role slipping away.

"Caught your ex on a trivid lifecam last night, Cass," Cam said, mug in hand. *"What's he doing on the moon?"*

"He ran away," she said. *"Maybe I should've."*

The midnight eyes saw only darkness. The seashell ears were sealed against her.

Weeks of doctor visits turned into months. A year. Two years. A long line of specialists pronounced themselves baffled. The agency's lawyers, fearing some unimaginable liability, blamed it on champagne.

Jamie grew, flawless in every way except one. The pale, exquisite body seemed quite empty like an anencephalic clone grown in a transplant tank.

They fought every night now. Johnny wanted Cass to put Jamie in an institution. Cass refused.

"Maybe they'll find a cure," Johnny said. They both knew better, even then.

Johnny's nightmares faded, but they slept in separate bedrooms. He became enraged if Cass intruded on him in the bathroom they shared, covering his genitals like an adolescent boy in a locker room.

"He's beautiful," Cass said, tracing the delicate lines of the child's sleeping face.

Johnny was signing Christmas cards provided by ISA. "I can't stand to look at him."

"You wanted him once."

"I thought I had a chance. One chance," he said. "I lost even that."

Cass lifted the sleeping child from the crib and held him close to her breast that he'd never learned to suck.

"Madonna and child!" Johnny said. He threw the cards on the floor.

Sometimes a play goes offtrack. Good InterActors deal with it. She'd give up her career. She'd keep Jamie. It was very dramatic.

Johnny went out the door without speaking, leaving the cards on the floor, the closet full of his clothes, his wedding ring on the bed.

Skeleplays weren't that much different from the previous century's interactive books. *If you want Captain Kirk to beam down to the planet, turn to page 38. If you want him to stay on the Enterprise, page 51* — The difference was three plotlines at once and the InterActors.

Cameron Gordon had a more cynical view: InterAct theater was popular in inverse proportion to the amount of governmental control its fans experienced in their lives. "In that case," Cass had said, "we'll be in business a long time!" Cameron shook his head. "Always something new. Always forkpoints."

The setting sun smeared the sky as she changed into her costume for the evening performance. She crammed the ugly hat on her head. It gave off a faint odor of mildew. The costume designer found it in a thrift shop.

The three interlocked plots ran in separate areas of the house simultaneously: Churchill's battle to save England from the Axis powers, the

problems he had with pro-appeasement forces in Parliament, and his romance with his secretary. A small change in only one theme meant another would have to change course to accommodate.

She adjusted the tiny plug that let her hear the tracker, easing into the character. The melodrama of real life outside the theater fell away. In the backstage maze, the rustle of programs and murmur of voices were muted. Cass glanced through a peephole onto the parlor set where Cameron was playing a scene with two members of the Tory party. Behind him, she saw the audience, thumbs on the buttons of their transmitters, intent on taking part in the play. She recognized several of the regulars. Behind the row of seats stood the cruisers who wandered from scene to scene rather than stay with one character throughout.

She heard her cue and entered the scene through the cast door. The familiar scene between Churchill and Miss Faversham began to play.

Sometimes a rowdy audience could get carried away by their sense of taking part in the action, but not tonight. They bunched together against the north wall, paying close attention.

"Well," Winston Churchill said. "What is your decision?"

The scene had arrived at Bertha Faversham's forkpoint.

She was aware of the flutter of fingers on transmitters from those who'd paid to influence Bertha's actions. A fraction of a second passed.

The tracker's voice murmured in her ear: "*Option B.*"

"I very much regret to say that I value my honor, Mr. Churchill, more than I value financial reward," Cass said haughtily, drawing on gloves that were too tight.

Under her words, she heard the tracker again, warning of a kink in the skele. "*Lord North on his way with dispatches.*"

She could deal with that, cutting her lines to fit the revised scene when Churchill's colleague arrived, working the crucial parts around their dialogue. Cameron caught her eye; he'd been advised of the kink too. The trick was to make it seamless.

Lord North burst into the room, a new InterActor given to tripping over his lines when flustered. Cass got off the set credibly.

The stage manager was in the maze, shaking a finger at Myron. The director frowned at Cass, passing on the SM's anger.

Sometimes life resembles a play with a bozo skele, all the forkpoints leading down to absurdity or despair.

Jamie's needs were minimal, food, clean diapers. But he lay unmoving in his crib, his small body almost bloodless in its white perfection. Vacant. Perhaps waiting. Past his first and then his second birthday. He never used his voice to make a sound. Perhaps he didn't have one.

And why was Cass being so stubborn? She didn't know the answer herself. Perhaps life was like improv, becoming hardline when no one paid attention.

Like Johnny, the ISA doctors urged Cass to put the baby away. A home, they said. Excellent care, and success with puzzling cases like this. Well, not quite like this.

The agency sent half Johnny's pay check every month. More, their lawyers advised, might have been an admission of liability.

At three, Jamie suddenly learned to walk.

Then one day a trivid popshow sent a lifecam to hover a foot above Jamie's head. It even followed Cass into the bathroom where Johnny had been ashamed to have her see his manhood, shriveled like roses in an early snow. Being on stage twenty-four/seven was more than she'd contracted for.

The home the doctors recommended cost the entire ISA monthly payment. Cass would need to supplement it. If she put Jamie away — and what difference would it make to the child who didn't know Cass was his mother? — she could go back to the theater.

Older now. Heavier.

It was a bozo skele. All anyone could do was hope it didn't go down to disaster.

The stage manager called a meeting after the performance. She sipped thick java a scene coach pressed into her hands and watched the SM gesticulating. They'd had a string of real InterActive aficionados recently, some of them bright kids from Cal Tech who liked to cause mischief. The cast had to work hard to keep the play tracking. They'd been using a lot of special effects to get out of impossible kinks and deadends that these say-sos forced. All that tech was expensive.

"All right, folks. Listen up." The stage manager banged a mug against

a steel strut. "We've got business to share. Stuff we want you to keep to yourselves."

Several of the InterActors, the younger ones including Noreen, sat cross-legged on the floor. Cass dragged out a folding chair. Cannabis had left a thin signature on the air, but no one smoked in the stage manager's presence.

A tall man wearing shades and a dark suit stood beside the SM, a nuleather folder in his hand. The stranger spoke about innovations in InterActive equipment that she didn't understand. He tucked the folder under his arm and held something out on the palm of his right hand. The InterActors leaned forward to see. Noreen made ooh and ahh noises.

"What is it?" Cass asked the scene coach.

"Bio-chip," the coach said. "Space Agency has 'em. I didn't know we'd managed to steal the technology."

Myron gazed across the bent heads at her. "Light-speed communication, darling. It'll eliminate that delay that's been killing us. Multi channels for InterActors, director, techs. Everybody! This will revolutionize the field."

Burying metal in her brain scared her more than Noreen's arrival.

"Give it to us in English, Myron," Cameron said.

"You haven't seen InterActive drama till you see how this little chip's going to work," Myron said. "InterActors will be able to monitor all the say-sos at every single forkpoint, not just their own. And they'll receive my instructions for all scenes simultaneously."

"Why would we want to hear everybody's say-sos?" the InterActor who played Lord North asked.

"Think what it'll do to a drama if you know what everybody's doing and can incorporate their decisions into your own."

"Sounds like we'll need to be Einsteins," Cass said.

"That's what's wrong with you, Cassandra. You're not flexible anymore, darling. InterActive drama's changing. This is the future!"

"And we're the first company to get it," the SM added.

"Of course, according to contract, we can't actually *force* you to have the implant," Myron said. "But we're going to be *awfully* appreciative of those who volunteer."

Now they were all asking questions.

"Disability pay for six weeks while you recuperate, and for the retraining period after that," Myron said.

"Do we have a choice of hospitals?" Noreen wanted to know.

"Well — " Myron's face had that fixed smile Cass had seen before when he was trying to weasel some particularly low clause past them into the contract. "We've made arrangements with a clinic in New Delhi."

"The procedure's not licensed in the States," Cameron translated.

"Theater's going to be dark for a couple of months, starting now," Myron said. "We're extending the normal end-of-year break. Then we start rehearsal on a brand new version of this play."

And of course, Cass thought, there she rose: Miss Pouty-Lips Vincenza herself, standing so close to Myron he could hardly look at her without staring down the low-cut front of her costume.

"Myron," Noreen said, "I want to be first to volunteer."

"Fabulous, baby! Anyone else?"

The SM took out an epad. Several hands went up, including Cameron's, but his went up more slowly.

"Cassandra?" Myron asked.

She was tired of making decisions that, like peanut say-sos, never really changed anything. Tired of living her life day after day with the enigma of her strange child, her lost marriage, her failing career.

"Won't last long," the scene coach muttered. "Same chip technology supports VR. And then where'll we be? Simulated on the net, that's where."

Myron bit his fingernail. "It's your decision, Cassandra."

Anonymous, red-tiled communities jamming the San Fernando Valley flashed by outside the maglev window. The hillsides were choked from valley floor to hill crest with apartment buildings, motels, shopping malls, high-rise office blocks, swimming pools and health clubs, like 3-D photocopies of one community stacked endlessly side by side.

At Woodland Hills, Cass got off the train and transferred to the tram winding down Topanga Canyon Road. Oak Grove House, private residential home for developmentally disturbed children, stood behind a high brick wall. The brief winter afternoon faded as she reached the main building, lights dimming on the set of this dumb skele she was trapped in.

Dry rosebushes lined the path, showtime over, like actors who've taken the wrong fork.

If she left the theater, she couldn't afford to keep Jamie at Oak Grove.

The administrator came outside to meet her, a red Christmas ribbon in her hair. "He's in the garden."

"How is he?" Cass asked the same question, month after month, year after year.

And she always got the same answer: "As well as we can expect. We mustn't look for miracles, must we?"

She didn't know why not.

She walked across the green lawn to the play area under the trees. Small children climbed the jungle gym; toddlers shrieked on the teeter totter and the slide.

Eight-year-old Jamie was all by himself, safety-belted into the swing. Cass stood a few feet away and looked at him. His cheeks glowed translucent as if light moved under his skin. His hair had been freshly cut, the white curls brushed back from his forehead. He wore the spaceship sweatshirt she'd brought him a year ago. It was still too big.

The skele came to this: a blind, deaf child on a swing.

He swung back and forth, back and forth, his sightless eyes fixed on trees at the dark edge of the lawn. If she didn't know better, she'd think he was normal.

Normal. There it was. In Johnny and Cass's bozo skele they'd chosen a fork that led to poor, abnormal Jamie.

But that wasn't quite right either. Normal was a word for other children. Jamie had been touched by something that couldn't be measured by human standards.

One of the therapists came up beside Cass, a young black man. He flashed her a quick smile, then stopped the swing and unbuckled her child.

"Time to stop swinging, Jamie. Mom came to see you."

"You know he can't hear."

"There may be other ways of hearing," the therapist said.

She stared at the dark young man with the child in his arms. "His father went into space."

"I was in high school, but I followed his news. Something made contact out there."

"It ate him up. Whatever it was."

"No," he said. "It gave you a gift."

He set Jamie down on the lawn at her feet.

"*Rosemary's Baby*?" she asked. "Or maybe the one about the astronaut — what was it called?"

"Much older mythology. Changelings and demigods and messiahs."

She watched Jamie. He seemed preoccupied with his delicate hands, the long fingers weaving like ghosts through the air. Almost like he was trying sign language.

"Look," she said. "Have you tried to teach him to sign? I mean, Helen Keller made it. Perhaps he could...."

Of course they'd tried. Dozens of doctors, teachers, scientists of all the new disciplines of space medicine. But nobody knew the language Jamie had in his brain. If he had one. Nobody on Earth.

"No," she said. "There's no meaning in it."

"Myths have their own meaning." The therapist touched her arm. "Love him as he is, Miz Romano. He isn't like the rest of us. Someday, maybe you'll know what he is."

He put the boy's hand in hers and walked away, leaving her with Jamie. She bent to lean her cheek against the boy's, her nose brushing his snow-cold hair.

It was InterActors who rescued a fantastic skele from failure. There are no miracles, but there is life. If she took Jamie out of Oak Grove, she could afford to leave the theater.

They walked back across the lawn in gathering dusk. She began to talk to the child about his father.

Forkpoints, she thought. Life was full of them.



A smart dresser needs smart shoes, right? But one does need to tread carefully...

Shoes

By Robert Sheckley

MY SHOES WERE WORN OUT and I was passing a Goodwill store so I went in to see if they had anything that would fit me.

The assortment you find in places like this is not to the most exacting taste. And the sizes they get don't fit a normal foot like mine. But this time I lucked out. A pair of lovely heavy cordovans. Built to last. Looking brand new, except for the deep gouge on top of one toe, a mark that had undoubtedly resulted in the shoes' disposal. The outer leather had been scraped away — maybe by some indigent like myself, outraged at so expensive a pair of shoes. You never know, it's the sort of thing I might have done myself in one of my darker moods.

But today I was feeling good. You don't find a pair of shoes like this every day, and the price tag read a ridiculous four dollars. I removed my ragged K-Mart sneakers and slipped into the cordovans, to see if they fit.

Immediately I heard a voice in my mind, clear as a bell, saying, "You're not Carlton Johnson. Who are you?"

"I'm Ed Phillips," I said aloud.

"Well, you have no right to be wearing Carlton Johnson's shoes."

"Hey, look," I said, "I'm in a Goodwill, these shoes are priced at four bucks, they're here for anyone to buy."

"Are you sure?" the voice said. "Carlton Johnson wouldn't have just given me away. He was so pleased when he purchased me, so happy when I was enabled to give him the maximum in shoe comfort."

"Who are you?" I said.

"Isn't it obvious? I am a prototype smart shoe, talking to you through micro-connections in my sole. I pick up your subvocalizations via your throat muscles, translate them, and broadcast my words back to you."

"You can do all that?"

"Yes, and more. Like I said, I'm a smart shoe."

By this time I noticed that a couple of ladies were looking at me funny and I realized they could hear only one side of the conversation, since the other side seemed to be taking place in my head. I paid for the shoes, which offered no further comment, and I got out of there.

Back to my own place, an efficiency one-room apartment in the Jack London Hotel on 4th near Pike. No comment from the shoes until I reached the top linoleum-covered step of the two-flight walk to my apartment, the elevator being a non-starter this evening.

The shoes said, "What a dump."

"How can you see my place?"

"My eyelets, where the laces go, are light-absorbing diodes."

"I realize you were used to better things with Carlton Johnson," I said.

"Everything was carpeted," the shoes said wistfully, "except for expanses of polished floor left bare on purpose." It paused and sighed. "The wear on me was minimal."

"And here you are in a flophouse," I said. "How have the mighty fallen!"

I must have raised my voice, because a door in the corridor opened and an old woman peered out. When she saw me apparently talking to myself, she shook her head sadly and closed the door.

"You do not have to shout," the shoes said. "Just directing your thoughts toward me is sufficient. I have no trouble picking up your subvocalizations."

"I guess I'm embarrassing you," I said aloud. "I am so terribly sorry."

The shoes did not answer until I had unlocked my door, stepped inside, turned on the light and closed the door again.

Then it said, "I am not embarrassed for myself, but for you, my new owner. I tried to watch out for Carlton Johnson, too."

"How?"

"For one thing, by stabilizing him. He had an unfortunate habit of taking a drink too many from time to time."

"So the guy was a lush?" I said. "Did he ever throw up on you?"

"Now you're being disgusting," the shoes said. "Carlton Johnson was a gentleman."

"It seems to me I've heard entirely enough about Carlton Johnson. Don't you have anything else to talk about?"

"He was my first," the shoes said. "But I'll stop talking about him if it distresses you."

"I couldn't care less," I said. "I'm now going to have a beer. If your majesty doesn't object."

"Why should I object? Just please try not to spill any on me."

"Whatsamatter, you got something against beer?"

"Neither for nor against. It's just that alcohol could fog my diodes."

I got a bottle of beer out of the little fridge, uncapped it and settled back in the small sagging couch. I reached for the TV clicker. But a thought crossed my mind.

"How come you talk that way?" I asked.

"What way?"

"Sort of formal, but always getting into things I wouldn't expect of a shoe."

"I'm a shoe computer, not just a shoe."

"You know what I mean. How come? You talk pretty smart for a gadget that adjusts shoes to feet."

"I'm not really a standard model," the shoe told me. "I'm a prototype. For better or worse, my makers gave me excess capacity."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm too smart to just fit shoes to people. I also have empathy circuitry."

"I haven't noticed much empathy toward me."

"That's because I'm still programmed to Carlton Johnson."

"Am I ever going to hear the last of that guy?"

"Don't worry, my deconditioning circuitry has kicked in. But it takes time for the aura effect to wear off."

I WATCHED A LITTLE television and went to bed. Buying a pair of smart shoes had taken it out of me. I woke up some time in the small hours of the night. The shoes were up to something, I could tell even without wearing them.

"What are you up to?" I asked, then realized the shoes couldn't hear me and groped around on the floor for them.

"Don't bother," the shoes said. "I can pick up your subvocalizations on remote, without a hard hookup."

"So what are you doing?"

"Just extracting square roots in my head. I can't sleep."

"Since when does a computer have to sleep?"

"A fault in my standby mode.... I need something to do. I miss my peripherals."

"What are you talking about?"

"Carlton Phillips had eyeglasses. I was able to tweak them up to give him better vision. You wouldn't happen to have a pair, would you?"

"I've got a pair, but I don't use them much."

"May I see them? It'll give me something to do."

I got out of bed, found my reading glasses on top of the TV, and set them down beside the shoes. "Thank you," the shoe computer said.

"Mrggh," I said, and went back to sleep.

"So tell me something about yourself," the shoes said in the morning.

"What's to tell? I'm a free-lance writer. Things have been going so well that I can afford to live in the Jack London. End of story."

"Can I see some of your work?"

"Are you a critic, too?"

"Not at all! But I am a creative thinking machine, and I may have some ideas that could be of use to you."

"Forget about it," I told him. "I don't want to show you any of my stuff."

The shoes said, "I happened to glance over your story 'Killer Goddess of the Dark Moon Belt.'"

"How did you just happen to glance at it?" I asked. "I don't remember showing it to you."

"It was lying open on your table."

"So all you could see was the title page."

"As a matter of fact, I read the whole thing."

"How were you able to do that?"

"I made a few adjustments to your glasses," the shoe said. "X-ray vision isn't so difficult to set up. I was able to read each page through the one above it."

"That's quite an accomplishment," I said. "But I don't appreciate you poking into my private matters."

"Private? You were going to send it to a magazine."

"But I haven't yet.... What did you think of it?"

"Old-fashioned. That sort of thing doesn't sell anymore."

"It was a parody, dummy.... So now you're not only a shoe adjuster but an analyst of the literary marketplace also?"

"I did glance over the writing books in your bookcase."

By the sound of the thoughts in my head, I could tell he didn't approve of my books, either.

"You know," the shoe said later, "You really don't have to be a bum, Ed. You're bright. You could make something of yourself."

"What are you, a psychologist as well as a shoe computer?"

"Nothing of the sort. I have no illusions about myself. But I've gotten to know you a bit in the last few hours since my empathy circuitry kicked in. I can't help but notice — to know — that you're an intelligent man with a good general education. All you need is a little ambition. You know, Ed, that could be supplied by a good woman."

"The last good woman left me shuddering," I said. "I'm really not ready just yet for the next one."

"I know you feel that way. But I've been thinking about Marsha —"

"How in hell do you know about Marsha?"

"Her name is in your little red phone book, which I happened to glance through with my X-ray vision in my efforts to better serve you."

"Listen, even my writing down Marsha's name was a mistake. She's a professional do-gooder. I hate that type."

"But she could be good for you. I noticed you put a star after her name."

"Did you also notice I crossed out the star?"

"That was a second thought. Now, on third thought, she might start looking good again. I suspect you two could go well together."

"You may be good at shoes," I said, "but you know nothing about the sort of women I like. Have you seen her legs?"

"The photo in your wallet showed only her face."

"What? You looked in my wallet, too?"

"With the help of your glasses.... And not out of any prurient interest, Ed, I assure you. I just want to help."

"You're already helping too much."

"I hope you won't mind the one little step I took."

"Step? What step?"

My doorbell rang. I glared at my shoes.

"I took the liberty of calling Marsha and asking her over."

"YOU DID WHAT?"

"Ed, Ed, calm down! I know it was taking a liberty. It's not as if I called your former boss, Mr. Edgarson, at Super-Gloss Publications."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"I would, but I didn't. But you could do a lot worse than go back to work for Edgarson. The salary was very nice."

"Have you read any of Gloss's publications? I don't know what you think you're doing, but you aren't going to do it to me!"

"Ed, Ed, I haven't done anything yet! And if you insist, I won't. Not without your permission!"

There was a knock at the door.

"Ed, I'm only trying to look out for you. What's a machine with empathy circuits and excess computing ability to do?"

"I'll tell you in a moment," I said.

I opened the door. Marsha stood there, beaming.

"Oh, Ed, I'm so glad you called!"

So the son of a bitch had imitated my voice, too! I glanced down at my shoes, at the gash in the cap of the left one. A light went off in my head. Realization! Epiphany!

"Come in, Marcia," I said. "I'm glad to see you. I have something for you."

She entered. I sat down in the only decent chair and stripped off the shoes, ignoring the shoe computer's agonized cry in my head of "Ed! Don't do this to me...."

Standing up again, I handed them to Marsha.

"What's this?" she said.

"Shoes for one of your charity cases," I said. "Sorry I don't have a paper bag for you to carry them in."

"But what am I going to do with — "

"Marsha, these are special shoes, computerized shoes. Give them to one of your down-and-outers, get him to put them on. They'll make a new man of him. Pick one of the weak-willed ones you specialize in. It'll give him backbone!"

She looked at the shoes. "This gash in one of them — "

"A minor flaw. I'm pretty sure the former owner did that himself," I told her. "A guy named Carlton Johnson. He couldn't stand the computer's messing around with his head, so he disfigured them and gave them away. Marsha, believe me, these shoes are perfect for the right man. Carlton Johnson wasn't the right man, and I'm not either. But someone you know will bless the ground you walk on for these, believe me."

And with that, I began herding her toward the door.

"When will I hear from you?" she said.

"Don't worry, I'll call," I told her, reveling in the swinish lie that went along with my despicable life.





A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD &
ELISABETH MALARTRE

A CYBORGED WORLD

MUCH thinking about both androids and cyborgs has projected upon them a political/social agenda — of revolutionaries.

The best cyborg movie, *Blade Runner*, achieved pathos about doomed cyborgs ("replicants") and showed a deep cyborg rage that could break open that future society.

More academically, University of California Professor Donna Haraway's essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (1985) held that the prospect of augmented bodies could "dismantle the binary" in human culture — that is, the assigned sexual and gender roles. She felt that the new body changes and information technology could erase both gender and racial boundaries and the "structures of oppression"

that have historically gone along with these.

Certainly the prospect of making labor less dependent upon motor muscles, with computing skills more important, seems to promise a more nearly equal footing for women in the workplace.

Perhaps the trend would go beyond that, to cyborg bodies with mixed male and female characteristics — buff features, sinuous curves and sexually ambiguous design features, available to all at a reasonable price?

Experience has not been kind to this idea. Where biology has extended our reach, women have flocked to the technologies that extended their ability to bear children, and thereafter have lived conventional lives. Generally, homosexuals have used reproductive technologies to create their own nuclear families, not new constructions, Lesbian couples have

used artificial insemination to bear children, but this is quite old tech. Haraway's "alternative societies" and homes with experimental modes of living have not emerged. Rather than Brave New Worlds, people have so far voted for the 'burbs. This may change in the future, but so far there seem no signs of it.

Some feminists have seen the constraints of the body as aiding forms of "ideological containment," meaning that biology equals destiny in the social sphere especially.

But consider popular entertainment, often the surest way to discover what the public will accept. Cartoon superheroes are now equal opportunity bruisers. Women superheroes are common now, super-female in appearance just as the men are super-male. But they are united in holding that aggression, muscle strength, speed, the killer instinct and solution through destruction are always the right answers. This is hardly a signature of femininity.

Interestingly, the popular Japanese cartoon film *Ghost in the Shell* treats cyborgs as "shells" that can have mixed sexual characteristics, appearing female in some views and male in others. The subtext is that to become a "truly living" being

the cyborg must display sexual traits, but can choose from either as the situation allows. Of course, to be both is to be, in the minds of many, either repulsive or to be neither.

Humans are no more sensitive than in matters of reproduction, and therefore sexuality. It seems unlikely that cyborgs or androids will carry forward a new agenda, but rather that augmentations will shore up the desire of people to fit into the norm, to not stand out more than they must. Few want to appear, either physically or socially, as a "freak."

It is one thing to stride down the street looking outlandish, perhaps with a half-ceramic head sporting a wearable computer, read by pixel-augmented lavender eyes ...and quite another never to find a mate, because no one of the right sexual polarity has chosen your special style statement.

But could even odder kinkiness lurk in our augmented future?

What will happen in the psyche of a cyborg? Will changes and augmentations grow to the point where the machine swamps the human? Would a truly enhanced wearer begin to resent the puny humans who service his bionics?

We take our biological body for granted, for the most part unaware of how it shapes our thoughts. But we are united with the rest of humanity by the biological limits of our fleshy existence: birth, development, reproduction, aging, and death. We have two parents and cannot produce offspring on our own. We have to eat other organisms, thus we have to tend them. We have to breathe a certain mixture of gases, live within a narrow range of temperatures. We need to sleep. We die at less than a hundred years of age. Our physical and mental capabilities are roughly the same, or at least within a familiar range. Certain substances will poison us, etc. This produces an extremely deep kinship with other humans, and to a lesser degree, other animals.

Dr. Anne Foerst, a theologian, works at the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at M.I.T. with scientists building two robots with humanoid features — Cog, a humanoid torso with arms and a head, and Kismet, the M.I.T. face robot. You might say she is a robo-theologian. She agrees that our particularly human intelligence is strongly body-bound.

She says, "In order for a machine to really be intelligent, it has to be embodied. We say intelligence

cannot be abstracted from the body. We feel that the body — the way it moves, grows, digests food, gets older, all have an influence on how a person thinks. That's why we've built Cog and Kismet to have humanoid features.

"Cog moves and experiences the world the way someone who can walk upright might. He experiences balance problems, friction problems, weight, gravity, all the stuff that we do, so that he can have a body feeling that is similar to ours."

But these are fixed, rather simple realizations of human expressiveness. What happens when this goes further?

Cyborgs will have different realities from ours. What if we were a brain encased in a metal body, unable to feel the touch of others or to reproduce, but with a vastly extended life span? Would we lose sympathy for the mass of all-flesh humans? And how much machine could we be without losing our humanity?

Hollywood has taken on the fusion of man and machine often, in such films as *RoboCop*, *Terminator*, and the TV series *The Six Million Dollar Man* and *The Bionic Woman*.

In *RoboCop*, a fatally wounded police officer, Murphy, is resurrected as a practically invulnerable cyborg. His memory erased, his human ethics are replaced by four directives to govern his behavior (an idea borrowed from Isaac Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics). At first he functions well as the invincible cop-machine envisioned by his corporate creators, but when his former partner recognizes him he starts on a quest to regain his humanity.

The human/machine dichotomy theme is not explored in the earlier TV series. *The Six Million Dollar Man* and *The Bionic Woman* are simply episodes of whiz-bang feats of strength, speed and visual or acoustic acuity by the bionically enhanced humans. The *Terminator* films expand the range of abilities, and the second uses the earlier cyborg form as a good-guy opponent of the shape-changing bad guy, implying a gradation of humanity among them.

In *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, humans encounter a collective intelligence, the Borg, functioning as a single mind with many mobile units. The analogy is roughly that of an ant colony acting as a single organism (although the concepts behind this TV creation can be altered

by scriptwriter whim and change over time). The Borg scour the galaxy for organic bodies to add to the consciousness. To achieve mind control over humans, an electronic device is plugged into one side of the head, usurping the function of one eye, and converting an individual human into a cyborg. Because the main story line concerns the (horrific to humans) collective mind theme, there is no discussion of the implications of the man-machine fusion as such.

At one end of this continuum is the wholly artificial android of Asimov's "The Bicentennial Man." He longs to become human, undergoes a series of upgrades exchanging flesh for metal, and finally achieves mortality. This idea is the basis for a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* character, the android named Data. Of course, fiction shows a long history of characters like Pinocchio and the Tin Man (of Oz) who aspire to humanity and mortality, but the man/machine clash is far stronger in modern works.

These stories share the comforting theme that as machines become more sophisticated, they will inevitably try to become more humanlike. In *RoboCop*, we sympathize with mostly artificial Murphy

when he takes off his helmet to reveal a face of flesh. He then goes on to defeat the entirely artificial robot that symbolizes his mechanical parts, thus affirming his kinship with the rest of humanity.

But that may not be how the future plays out.

A fresh angle on cyborgs appeared in Damon Knight's classic 1968 short story, "Masks." The point-of-view character is a cyborg in a new body, the focus of a whole research group, but displaying emotional problems. He refuses to reveal the cause of his troubles to those working on the cyborg project, but in a scene near the end, we enter his thoughts:

No more adrenal glands to pump adrenaline into his blood, so he could not feel fright or rage. They had released him from all that — love, hate, the whole sloppy mess — but they had forgotten there was still one emotion he could feel.

Sinescu, with the black bristles of his beard sprouting through his oily skin. A whitehead ripe in the crease beside his nostril...

Babcock, with his broad pink nose shining with grease, crusts of white matter in the corners of his eyes. Food mortar between his teeth.

Sam's wife, with raspberry-colored paste on her mouth. Face smeared with tears, a bright bubble in one nostril. And the damn dog, shiny nose, wet eyes....

Note the repeated use of the nose, probably not our best feature, as inherently ugly. Later, in the story's last line, we feel how this cyborg wants to get away from all things organic and fleshy, to become wholly metallic, on the Moon: *And he was there, and it was not far enough, not yet, for the Earth hung overhead like a rotten fruit, blue with mold, crawling, wrinkling, purulent and alive.*

Will cyborgs then do the opposite of so many stories, and try to be non-human? We would term that a "disorder," but it could seem utterly natural to one who felt the cool, clean beauties of his new state; a fresh, new being of unknown impulses.

Of course, matters need not go so far to have major social effects. Cyborgs may feel themselves to be sufficiently different from flesh-and-blood humans that they will draw away, perhaps repelled, and form their own interest group. Mostly metal cyborgs may have different concerns about their environment than humans. Cyborg politics will emerge.

This is not as far-fetched as it might seem. Groups representing the handicapped have become very active in recent years, in the U.S. and Europe. As a result, wheelchair access to everything from public bathrooms to castles and beaches has become an important marketing consideration.

In the future, we can look for some separatist sentiment from 'borged people of similar attributes. They will quite naturally find the company of others comforting, an emotional necessity.

Brain transfers into titanium bodies are admittedly very far off, but what of those with significant mechanical or electronic parts? Neurological implants, perhaps, to correct stroke damage or catastrophic spinal cord injury. We are now entering the realm of the true cyborg, because in order to function, their implants would have to be permanent.

Wearers would feel instant sympathy with others bearing similar implants — sharing the color of a sunset as seen through cameras rather than eyes, for example. Wary of being considered freaks by the rest of humanity, they would draw into their own group.

Already deaf activists celebrate their deafness, calling it part of nor-

mal human diversity, and not a handicap. They communicate via Ameslan (American Sign Language), which they insist is a true language, complete with grammar, and they see the use of implants like cochlear implants as a threat to "deaf culture." In the fall of 2000, the movie *Sound and Fury* explored these issues on the screen.

How many implants would it take before a person stopped being human, and become a cyborg in the eyes of the world?

Maybe fewer than we imagine.

Steve Mann from M.I.T., who has worn an experimental personal computer (not even an implant) since the 1970s, noticed that people avoided social contact with him unless the device was small enough to be overlooked. His wearable computer, while allowing him access to everybody on the Internet, cut him off from the people next to him. He *looked different*. Even cell phones have this effect.

The old adage, "birds of a feather flock together," is also true of us. Will we hear calls for bans of cyborgs in restaurants — ("People are trying to eat here!")? The "robot revolt" in Karel Capek's *R.U.R.* might result, not from overwork, but from perceived discrimination.

Humans form associations of affinity: the distinction between "them" and "us" has been the basis for human culture from long before we made civilization.

Ironically, the final act by a mostly machine cyborg's human soul might be to ally himself with others like him against fully biological humans.

Is there, then, some definition of personhood beyond the body?

In time, we will be able to fix problems closer and closer to the cortex, and even into the cortex itself — the seat of being.

The question these technologies may raise is how much of one's motor skills, memory and cognition one may lose to be treated as dead, "socially dead" or "sick enough to not require further medical treatment or feeding," *if those abilities can eventually be restored....*

Research is also being conducted on the creation of computer chip matrices into which nerves can grow, and which could permit two-way communication between neurons and computers.... Such computer-brain interfaces raise the possibility that computer technology may also be developed to remediate neural capacities. These

technologies are currently only being applied to peripheral nerves, and the control of prosthetic devices, but they may eventually be applied to cerebral tissue.

Ultimately, argues ethicist Robert Hughes, a true definition of personhood should transcend the purely physical. The "social personhood" concept asserts that citizenship, rights, and value adhere not to bodies, but to "subjective persons."

As he puts it, "Once we begin to remediate cerebral cortex injuries I believe we will be forced beyond a neo-cortical definition of death to one focused on the continuity of subjective self-awareness. Those who have a continuous sense of self-awareness, *in whatever media*, will be considered social persons, with attendant rights and obligations."

In this definition of death lie the seeds of the coming issues about advanced cyborgs. If society moves away from the body-as-person concept, and instead accepts social personhood, it could lead to far-reaching changes, including granting personhood status to uploaded human consciousness and brains maintained outside of bodies, or transplanted into synthetic bodies.

That large-scale upheaval in

social values is unlikely to be necessary very soon, but the entry of ethicists into the debate signals that it is no longer simply a story idea for fiction writers.

Is a brain in a metal body still human? Science fiction authors who have treated the issue opt for characters with deep psychological problems, but where's the story if they were boringly normal?

As such, it has been the subject of stories, novels (William Gibson's *Neuromancer*) and not a few "B" movies (*Donovan's Brain*). Damon Knight's story "Masks" explores what he terms total prosthesis, the transplant of a brain into a wholly artificial body — the extreme cyborg. Certainly this would bring unforeseen personality changes, because no psychologist doubts the necessity of bodies to our mental stability.

Take away the external world and we go crazy. People placed in immersion tanks, where they float weightless in warm saline solutions, insulated from light and sound, start imagining stimuli. With no signals coming in, their minds turn up the gain, trying to pull some signal out of the blankness. Soon enough, they hallucinate, seeing and feeling inputs that do not exist. Something

like this leads people to see mirages in deserts, where the lack of discernible features calls the mind to summon up its inner resources.

It is no accident that religious mystics, like John the Baptist, go alone into the desert's featureless retreats for enlightenment. A cyborg whose body is distant and divorced from much of the customary human constellation of sensations and emotions, as in "Masks," will be hard to identify with. *No more adrenal glands to pump adrenaline into his blood, so he could not feel fright or rage. They had released him from all that — love, hate, the whole sloppy mess—*

So transplanted people do not lose feelings, but rather, as discussed earlier, experience new ones. This seems probable for all stages of the cyborg, as new states of the human condition.

The ultimate promise of the cyborg is better people. Yet this may mean redefining personhood in ways that will seem radical to many. Not now, at the early stages, but eventually, perhaps in half a century, cyborgs may be a significant issue.

Public controversies frequently pit people talking statistics against those talking myth. As futurist

Walter Truett Anderson puts it, "the rationalists with their hard disks full of economic or scientific information bump against invocations of Frankenstein and Gaia."

The old treatment modes — preventive, palliative, and curative — shall soon give way to a powerful fourth: substitutive. People find unremarkable an aging athlete with an artificial left shoulder, wired back together after a softball accident (that's me). Soon he or she may need a pacemaker, or even some of the odder additions people accept: artificial sphincters, prostheses, cochlear implants to restore hearing. Mechanical, they seem as natural to us now as eyeglasses and tooth fillings.

Anderson predicts that the next major augmentation will probably be organ transplants with artificial assists, both through drugs and via in-body cyborg devices. This will bring, he says, a wholly "new chapter in the history of animal husbandry — and indeed in the history of life on Earth — because there has never been an animal able to exchange entire organs with those of other species."

Human-human transplants are commonplace, with new anti-rejection drugs and better surgery spurring their survival. In the last five years costs have been cut nearly

in half, so that a kidney transplant now costs \$50,000, and a liver \$200,000. But with transplant numbers rising at fifty percent every six years, donors are scarce. Pigs have organs the right size for humans, and such "transgenic" animals will be used instead, possibly with artificial devices to help. Genetically engineered with human proteins to cloak offending pig molecules, pig organs will fend off our defenses, reducing the rejection problems. The key development is information at the molecular level.

Where should we let it drive us? No moral anchors here seem trustworthy. Invoking Nature with its implied supremacy ignores that many cultures have fundamentally differing ideas of even what Nature is, much less how it should work.

Other cultural guidelines — religious doctrine, scientific objectivity, fashion — are similarly mutable and local, necessary perhaps but not sufficient as guides. Anderson's "blessing and scourge of our time" is the dizzying multitude of our options. Cultures must clash when the questions are greater than regional.

Who will win, in this future? Radical, enraged cyborgs, or "human fundamentalists?"

The nature of technodreams is

to force us to ask ever more fundamental questions.

Comments on this column welcome at gbenford@uci.edu, or

Physics Dept., Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92697. This column was based in part on the PBS TV show and book *Beyond Human* by GB and Elisabeth Malartre. ☞



"I have a bigger spearpoint, but I forgot to bring an adapter!"

Okay, don't believe your editor. No one will blame you. But there are papers and documents to prove it, a contract dated October 2000, a check, e-mail correspondence. Fact is, the following story was written before November 7, 2000. Of course you don't believe it, in spite of the evidence. No one blames you. But it's true.

*Dale Bailey reports that his first novel, *Giants in the Earth*, is slated for publication in the spring of 2003. He has also contracted for a story collection, *The Resurrection Man's Legacy and Other Stories*, to be published around the same time. We have chosen not to ask him how he voted (or how often!) after writing this far-fetched tale.*

Death and Suffrage

By Dale Bailey

IT'S FUNNY HOW THINGS happen, Burton used to tell me. The very moment you're engaged in some task of mind-numbing insignificance

— cutting your toenails, maybe, or fishing in the sofa for the remote — the world is being refashioned around you. You stand before a mirror to brush your teeth, and halfway around the planet flood waters are on the rise. Every minute of every day, the world transforms itself in ways you can hardly imagine, and there you are, sitting in traffic or wondering what's for lunch or just staring blithely out a window. History happens while you're making other plans, Burton always says.

I guess I know that now. I guess we all know that.

Me, I was in a sixth-floor Chicago office suite working on my résumé when it started. The usual chaos swirled around me — phones braying, people scurrying about, the televisions singing exit poll data over the din — but it all had a forced artificial quality. The campaign was over. Our numbers people had told us everything we needed to know: when the polls opened that morning, Stoddard was up seventeen points. So there I sat,

dejected and soon to be unemployed, with my feet on a rented desk and my laptop propped against my knees, mulling over synonyms for *directed*. As in *directed a staff of fifteen*. As in *directed public relations for the Democratic National Committee*. As in *directed a national political campaign straight into the toilet*.

Then CNN started emitting the little overture that means somewhere in the world history is happening, just like Burton always says.

I looked up as Lewis turned off the television.

"What'd you do that for?"

Lewis leaned over to shut my computer down. "I'll show you," he said.

I followed him through the suite, past clumps of people huddled around televisions. Nobody looked my way. Nobody had looked me in the eye since Sunday. I tried to listen, but over the shocked buzz in the room I couldn't catch much more than snatches of unscripted anchor-speak. I didn't see Burton, and I supposed he was off drafting his concession speech. "No sense delaying the inevitable," he had told me that morning.

"What gives?" I said to Lewis in the hall, but he only shook his head.

Lewis is a big man, fifty, with the drooping posture and hangdog expression of an adolescent. He stood in the elevator and watched the numbers cycle, rubbing idly at an acne scar. He had lots of them, a whole face pitted from what had to be among the worst teenage years in human history. I had never liked him much, and I liked him even less right then, but you couldn't help admiring the intelligence in his eyes. If Burton had been elected, Lewis would have served him well. Now he'd be looking for work instead.

The doors slid apart, and Lewis steered me through the lobby into a typical November morning in Chicago: a diamond-tipped wind boring in from the lake, a bruised sky spitting something that couldn't decide whether it wanted to be rain or snow. I grew up in Southern California — my grandparents raised me — and there's not much I hate more than Chicago weather; but that morning I stood there with my shirtsleeves rolled to the elbow and my tie whipping over my shoulder, and I didn't feel a thing.

"My God," I said, and for a moment, my mind just locked up. All I could think was that not two hours ago I had stood in this very spot watching Burton work the crowd, and then the world had still been sane.

Afterward, Burton had walked down the street to cast his ballot. When he stepped out of the booth, the press had been waiting. Burton charmed them, the consummate politician even in defeat. We could have done great things.

And even then the world had still been sane.

No longer.

It took me a moment to sort it all out — the pedestrians shouldering by with wild eyes, the bellhop standing dumbfounded before the hotel on the corner, his chin bobbing at half-mast. Three taxis had tangled up in the street, bleeding steam, and farther up the block loomed an overturned bus the size of a beached plesiosaur. Somewhere a woman was screaming atonally, over and over and over, with staccato hitches for breath. Sirens wailed in the distance. A TV crew was getting it all on tape, and for the first time since I blew Burton's chance to hold the highest office in the land, I stood in the presence of a journalist who wasn't shoving a mike in my face to ask me what had come over me.

I was too stunned even to enjoy it.

Instead, like Lewis beside me, I just stared across the street at the polling place. Dead people had gathered there, fifteen or twenty of them, and more arriving. Even then, there was never any question in my mind that they were dead. You could see it in the way they held their bodies, stiff as marionettes; in their shuffling gaits and the bright haunted glaze of their eyes. You could see it in the lacerations yawning open on the ropy coils of their guts, in their random nakedness, their haphazard clothes — hospital gowns and blood-stained blue jeans and immaculate suits fresh from unsealed caskets. You could see it in the dark patches of decay that blossomed on their flesh. You could just see that they were dead. It was every zombie movie you ever saw, and then some.

Goose flesh erupted along my arms, and it had nothing to do with the wind off Lake Michigan.

"My God," I said again, when I finally managed to unlock my brain. "What do they want?"

"They want to vote," said Lewis.

The dead have been voting in Chicago elections since long before Richard J. Daley took office, one wag wrote in the next morning's

Tribune, but yesterday's events bring a whole new meaning to the tradition.

I'll say.

The dead had voted, all right, and not just in Chicago. They had risen from hospital gurneys and autopsy slabs, from open coffins and embalming tables in every precinct in the nation, and they had cast their ballots largely without interference. Who was going to stop them? More than half the poll-workers had abandoned ship when the zombies started shambling through the doors, and even workers who stayed at their posts had usually permitted them to do as they pleased. The dead didn't threaten anyone — they didn't do much of anything you'd expect zombies to do, in fact. But most people found that inscrutable gaze unnerving. Better to let them cast their ballots than bear for long the knowing light in those strange eyes.

And when the ballots were counted, we learned something else as well: They voted for Burton. Every last one of them voted for Burton.

"It's your fault," Lewis said at breakfast the next day.

Everyone else agreed with him, I could tell, the entire senior staff, harried and sleep-deprived. They studied their food as he ranted, or scrutinized the conference table or scribbled frantic notes in their dayplanners. Anything to avoid looking me in the eye. Even Burton, alone at the head of the table, just munched on a bagel and stared at CNN, the muted screen aflicker with footage of zombies staggering along on their unfathomable errands. Toward dawn, as the final tallies rolled in from the western districts, they had started to gravitate toward cemeteries. No one yet knew why.

"My fault?" I said, but my indignation was manufactured. About five that morning, waking from nightmare in my darkened hotel room, I had arrived at the same conclusion as everyone else.

"The goddamn talk show," Lewis said, as if that explained everything.

And maybe it did.

The goddamn talk show in question was none other than *Crossfire*, and the Sunday before the polls opened I got caught in it. I had broken the first commandment of political life, a commandment I had flogged relentlessly for the last year. Stay on message, stick to the talking points.

Thou shalt not speak from the heart.

The occasion of this amateurish mistake was a six-year-old girl named Dana Maguire. Three days before I went on the air, a five-year-old boy gunned Dana down in her after-school program. The kid had found the pistol in his father's night stand, and just as Dana's mother was coming in to pick her up, he tugged it from his insulated lunch sack and shot Dana in the neck. She died in her mother's arms while the five-year-old looked on in tears.

Just your typical day in America, except the first time I saw Dana's photo in the news, I felt something kick a hole in my chest. I can remember the moment to this day: October light slanting through hotel windows, the television on low while I talked to my grandmother in California. I don't have much in the way of family. There had been an uncle on my father's side, but he had drifted out of my life after my folks died, leaving my mother's parents to raise me. There's just the two of us since my grandfather passed on five years ago, and even in the heat of a campaign, I try to check on Gran every day. Mostly she rattles on about old folks in the home, a litany of names and ailments I can barely keep straight at the best of times. And that afternoon, half-watching some glib CNN hardbody do a stand-up in front of Little Tykes Academy, I lost the thread of her words altogether.

Next thing I know, she's saying, "Robert, Robert —" in this troubled voice, and me, I'm sitting on a hotel bed in Dayton, Ohio, weeping for a little girl I never heard of. Grief, shock, you name it — ten years in public life, nothing like that had ever happened to me before. But after that, I couldn't think of it in political terms. After that, Dana Maguire was personal.

Predictably, the whole thing came up on *Crossfire*. Joe Stern, Stoddard's campaign director and a man I've known for years, leaned into the camera and espoused the usual line — you know, the one about the constitutional right to bear arms, as if Jefferson had personally foreseen the rapid-fire semi-automatic with a sixteen-round clip. Coming from the mouth of Joe Stern, a smug fleshy ideologue who ought to have known better, this line enraged me.

Even so, I hardly recognized the voice that responded to him. I felt as though something else was speaking through me — as though a voice had

possessed me, a speaker from that broken hole in the center of my chest.

What it said, that voice, was: "If Grant Burton is elected, he'll see that every handgun in the United States is melted into pig iron. He'll do everything in his power to save the Dana Maguires of this nation."

Joe Stern puffed up like a toad. "This isn't about Dana Maguire — "

The voice interrupted him. "If there's any justice in the universe, Dana Maguire will rise up from her grave to haunt you," the voice said. It said, "If it's not about Dana Maguire, then what on Earth is it about?"

Stoddard had new ads in saturation before the day was out: Burton's face, my words in voice-over. *If Grant Burton is elected, he'll see that every handgun in the United States is melted into pig iron.* By Monday afternoon, we had plummeted six points and Lewis wasn't speaking to me.

I couldn't seem to shut him up now, though.

He leaned across the table and jabbed a thick finger at me, overturning a styrofoam cup of coffee. I watched the black pool spread as he shouted. "We were up five points, we had it won before you opened your goddamn — "

Angela Dey, our chief pollster, interrupted him. "Look!" she said, pointing at the television.

Burton touched the volume button on the remote, but the image on the screen was clear enough: a cemetery in upstate New York, one of the new ones where the stones are set flush to the earth to make mowing easier. Three or four zombies had fallen to their knees by a fresh grave.

"Good God," Dey whispered. "What are they doing?"

No one gave her an answer and I suppose she hadn't expected one. She could see as well as the rest of us what was happening. The dead were scrabbling at the earth with their bare hands.

A line from some old poem I had read in college —

— *ahh, who's digging on my grave* —

— lodged in my head, rattling around like angry candy, and for the first time I had a taste of the hysteria that would possess us all by the time this was done. Graves had opened, the dead walked the Earth. All humanity trembled.

Ahh, who's digging on my grave?

Lewis flung himself back against his chair and glared at me balefully. "This is all your fault."

"At least they voted for us," I said.

Not that we swept into the White House at the head of a triumphal procession of zombies. Anything but, actually. The voting rights of the dead turned out to be a serious constitutional question, and Stoddard lodged a complaint with the Federal Election Commission. Dead people had no say in the affairs of the living, he argued, and besides, none of them were legally registered anyway. Sensing defeat, the Democratic National Committee counter-sued, claiming that the sheer *presence* of the dead may have kept legitimate voters from the polls.

While the courts pondered these issues in silence, the world convulsed. Church attendance soared. The president impaneled experts and blue-ribbon commissions, the Senate held hearings. The CDC convened a task force to search for biological agents. At the UN, the Security Council debated a quarantine against the United States; the stock market lost fifteen percent on the news.

Meanwhile, the dead went unheeding about their business. They never spoke or otherwise attempted to communicate, yet you could sense an intelligence, inhuman and remote, behind their mass resurrection. They spent the next weeks opening fresh graves, releasing the recently buried from entombment. With bare hands, they clawed away the dirt; through sheer numbers, they battered apart the concrete vaults and sealed caskets. You would see them in the streets, stinking of formaldehyde and putrefaction, their hands torn and ragged, the rich earth of the grave impacted under their fingernails.

Their numbers swelled.

People died, but they didn't *stay* dead; the newly resurrected kept busy at their graves.

A week after the balloting, the Supreme Court handed down a decision overturning the election. Congress, meeting in emergency session, set a new date for the first week of January. If nothing else, the year 2000 debacle in Florida had taught us the virtue of speed.

Lewis came to my hotel room at dusk to tell me.

"We're in business," he said.

When I didn't answer, he took a chair across from me. We stared over the fog-shrouded city in silence. Far out above the lake, threads of rain seamed the sky. Good news for the dead. The digging would go easier.

Lewis turned the bottle on the table so he could read the label. I knew what it was: Glenfiddich, a good single malt. I'd been sipping it from a hotel tumbler most of the afternoon.

"Why'nt you turn on some lights in here?" Lewis said.

"I'm fine in the dark."

Lewis grunted. After a moment, he fetched the other glass. He wiped it out with his handkerchief and poured.

"So tell me."

Lewis tilted his glass, grimaced. "January fourth. The president signed the bill twenty minutes ago. Protective cordons fifty yards from polling stations. Only the living can vote. Jesus. I can't believe I'm even saying that." He cradled his long face in his hands. "So you in?"

"Does he want me?"

"Yes."

"What about you, Lewis? Do you want me?"

Lewis said nothing. We just sat there, breathing in the woodsy aroma of the scotch, watching night bleed into the sky.

"You screwed me at staff meeting the other day," I said. "You hung me out to dry in front of everyone. It won't work if you keep cutting the ground out from under my feet."

"Goddamnit, I was *right*. In ten seconds, you destroyed everything we've worked for. We had it won."

"Oh come on, Lewis. If *Crossfire* never happened, it could have gone either way. Five points, that's nothing. We were barely outside the plus and minus, you know that."

"Still. Why'd you have to say that?"

I thought about that strange sense I'd had at the time: another voice speaking through me. Mouthpiece of the dead.

"You ever think about that little girl, Lewis?"

He sighed. "Yeah. Yeah, I do." He lifted his glass. "Look. If you're angling for some kind of apology — "

"I don't want an apology."

"Good," he said. Then, grudgingly: "We need you on this one, Rob. You know that."

"January," I said. "That gives us almost two months."

"We're way up right now."

"Stoddard will make a run. Wait and see."

"Yeah." Lewis touched his face. It was dark, but I could sense the gesture. He'd be fingering his acne scars, I'd spent enough time with him to know that. "I don't know, though," he said. "I think the right might sit this one out. They think it's the fuckin' Rapture, who's got time for politics?"

"We'll see."

He took the rest of his scotch in a gulp and stood. "Yeah. We'll see."

I didn't move as he showed himself out, just watched his reflection in the big plate glass window. He opened the door and turned to look back, a tall man framed in light from the hall, his face lost in shadow.

"Rob?"

"Yeah?"

"You all right?"

I drained my glass and swished the scotch around in my mouth. I'm having a little trouble sleeping these days, I wanted to say. I'm having these dreams.

But all I said was, "I'm fine, Lewis. I'm just fine."

I WASN'T, though, not really.

None of us were, I guess, but even now — maybe *especially* now — the thing I remember most about those first weeks is how little the resurrection of the dead altered our everyday lives. Isolated incidents made the news — I remember a serial killer being arrested as his victims heaved themselves bodily from their shallow backyard graves — but mostly people just carried on. After the initial shock, markets stabilized. Stores filled up with Thanksgiving turkeys; radio stations began counting the shopping days until Christmas.

Yet I think the hysteria must have been there all along, like a swift current just beneath the surface of a placid lake. An undertow, the kind of current that'll kill you if you're not careful. Most people looked okay, but scratch the surface and we were all going nuts in a thousand quiet ways.

Ahh, who's digging on my grave, and all that.

Me, I couldn't sleep. The stress of the campaign had been mounting steadily even before my meltdown on *Crossfire*, and in those closing days,

with the polls in California — and all those lovely delegates — a hair too close to call, I'd been waking grainy-eyed and yawning every morning. I was feeling guilty, too. Three years ago, Gran broke her hip and landed in a Long Beach nursing home. And while I talked to her daily, I could never manage to steal a day or two to see her, despite all the time we spent campaigning in California.

But the resurrection of the dead marked a new era in my insomnia. Stumbling to bed late on election night, my mind blistered with images of zombies in the streets, I fell into a fevered dream. I found myself wandering through an abandoned city. Everything burned with the tenebrous significance of dreams — every brick and stone, the scraps of newsprint tumbling down high-rise canyons, the darkness pooling in the mouths of desolate subways. But the worst thing of all was the sound, the lone sound in all that sea of silence: the obscurely terrible cadence of a faraway clock, impossibly magnified, echoing down empty alleys and forsaken avenues.

The air rang with it, haunting me, drawing me on at last into a district where the buildings loomed over steep, close streets, admitting only a narrow wedge of sky. An open door beckoned, a black slot in a high, thin house. I pushed open the gate, climbed the broken stairs, paused in the threshold. A colossal grandfather clock towered within, its hands poised a minute short of midnight. Transfixed, I watched the heavy pendulum sweep through its arc, driving home the hour.

The massive hands stood upright.

The air shattered around me. The very stones shook as the clock began to toll. Clapping my hands over my ears, I turned to flee, but there was nowhere to go. In the yard, in the street — as far as I could see — the dead had gathered. They stood there while the clock stroked out the hours, staring up at me with those haunted eyes, and I knew suddenly and absolutely — the way you know things in dreams — that they had come for me at last, that they had always been coming for me, for all of us, if only we had known it.

I woke then, coldly afraid.

The first gray light of morning slit the drapes, but I had a premonition that no dawn was coming, or at least a very different dawn from any I had ever dared imagine.

Stoddard made his run with two weeks to go.

December fourteenth, we're 37,000 feet over the midwest in a leased Boeing 737, and Angela Dey drops the new numbers on us.

"Gentleman," she says, "we've hit a little turbulence."

It was a turning point, I can see that now. At the time, though, none of us much appreciated her little joke.

The resurrection of the dead had shaken things up — it had put us on top for a month or so — but Stoddard had been clawing his way back for a couple of weeks, crucifying us in the farm belt on a couple of ag bills where Burton cast deciding votes, hammering us in the south on vouchers. We knew that, of course, but I don't think any of us had foreseen just how close things were becoming.

"We're up seven points in California," Dey said. "The gay vote's keeping our heads above water, but the numbers are soft. Stoddard's got momentum."

"Christ," Lewis said, but Dey was already passing around another sheet.

"It gets worse," she said. "Florida, we're up two points. A statistical dead heat. We've got the minorities, Stoddard has the seniors. Everything's riding on turnout."

Libby Dixon, Burton's press secretary, cleared her throat. "We've got a pretty solid network among Hispanics —"

Dey shook her head. "Seniors win that one every time."

"Hispanics *never* vote," Lewis said. "We might as well wrap Florida up with a little bow and send it to Stoddard."

Dey handed around another sheet. She'd orchestrated the moment for maximum impact, doling it out one sheet at a time like that. Lewis slumped in his seat, probing his scars as she worked her way through the list: Michigan, New York, Ohio, all three delegate rich, all three of them neck-and-neck races. Three almost physical blows, too, you could see them in the faces ranged around the table.

"What the hell's going on here?" Lewis muttered as Dey passed out another sheet, and then the news out of Texas rendered even him speechless. Stoddard had us by six points. I ran through a couple of Alamo analogies before deciding that discretion was the better part of wisdom. "I thought we were gaining there," Lewis said.

Dey shrugged. I just read the numbers, I don't make them up.

"Things could be worse," Libby Dixon said.

"Yeah, but Rob's not allowed to do *Crossfire* anymore," Lewis said, and a titter ran around the table. Lewis is good, I'll give him that. You could feel the tension ease.

"Suggestions?" Burton said.

Dey said, "I've got some focus group stuff on education. I was thinking maybe some ads clarifying our —"

"Hell with the ads," someone else said, "we've gotta spend more time in Florida. We've got to engage Stoddard on his ground."

"Maybe a series of town meetings?" Lewis said, and they went around like that for a while. I tried to listen, but Lewis's little icebreaker had reminded me of the dreams. I knew where I was — 37,000 feet of dead air below me, winging my way toward a rally in Virginia — but inside my head I hadn't gone anywhere at all. Inside my head, I was stuck in the threshold of that dream house, staring out into the eyes of the dead.

The world had changed irrevocably, I thought abruptly.

That seems self-evident, I suppose, but at the time it had the quality of genuine revelation. The fact is, we had all — and I mean everyone by that, the entire culture, not just the campaign — we had all been pretending that nothing much had changed. Sure, we had UN debates and a CNN feed right out of a George Romero movie, but the implications of mass resurrection — the spiritual implications — had yet to bear down upon us. We were in denial. In that moment, with the plane rolling underneath me and someone — Tyler O'Neill I think it was, Libby Dixon's mousy assistant — droning on about going negative, I thought of something I'd heard a professor mention back at Northwestern: Copernicus formulated the heliocentric model of the solar system in the mid-1500s, but the Church didn't get around to punishing anyone for it until they threw Galileo in jail nearly a hundred years later. They spent the better part of a century trying to ignore the fact that the fundamental geography of the universe had been altered with a single stroke.

And so it had again.

The dead walked.

Three simple words, but everything else paled beside them — social security, campaign finance reform, education vouchers. *Everything*.

I wadded Dey's sheet into a noisy ball and flung it across the table. Tyler O'Neill stuttered and choked, and for a moment everyone just stared in silence at that wad of paper. You'd have thought I'd hurled a hand grenade, not a two-paragraph summary of voter idiocy in the Lone Star state.

Libby Dixon cleared her throat. "I hardly thin — "

"Shut up, Libby," I said. "Listen to yourselves for Christ's sake. We got zombies in the street and you guys are worried about going negative?"

"The whole..." Dey flapped her hand. "...zombie thing, it's not even on the radar. My numbers — "

"People *lie*, Angela."

Libby Dixon swallowed audibly.

"When it comes to death, sex, and money, everybody lies. A total stranger calls up on the telephone, and you expect some soccer mom to share her feelings about the fact that Grandpa's rotten corpse is staggering around in the street?"

I had their attention all right.

For a minute the plane filled up with the muted roar of the engines. No human sound at all. And then Burton — Burton smiled.

"What are you thinking, Rob?"

"A great presidency is a marriage between a man and a moment," I said. "You told me that. Remember?"

"I remember."

"This is your moment, sir. You have to stop running away from it."

"What do you have in mind?" Lewis asked.

I answered the question, but I never even looked Lewis's way as I did it. I just held Grant Burton's gaze. It was like no one else was there at all, like it was just the two of us, and despite everything that's happened since, that's the closest I've ever come to making history.

"I want to find Dana Maguire," I said.

I'd been in politics since my second year at Northwestern. It was nothing I ever intended — who goes off to college hoping to be a senate aide? — but I was idealistic, and I liked the things Grant Burton stood for, so I found myself working the phones that fall as an unpaid volunteer. One thing led to another — an internship on the Hill, a post-graduate job as a research assistant — and somehow I wound up inside the beltway.

I used to wonder how my life might have turned out had I chosen another path. My senior year at Northwestern, I went out with a girl named Gwen, a junior, freckled and streaky blonde, with the kind of sturdy good looks that fall a hair short of beauty. Partnered in some forgettable lab exercise, we found we had grown up within a half hour of one another. Simple geographic coincidence, two Californians stranded in the frozen north, sustained us throughout the winter and into the spring. But we drifted in the weeks after graduation, and the last I had heard of her was a Christmas card five or six years back. I remember opening it and watching a scrap of paper slip to the floor. Her address and phone number, back home in Laguna Beach, with a little note. *Call me some time*, it said, but I never did.

So there it was.

I was thirty-two years old, I lived alone, I'd never held a relationship together longer than eight months. Gran was my closest friend, and I saw her three times a year if I was lucky. I went to my ten-year class reunion in Evanston, and everybody there was in a different life-place than I was. They all had kids and homes and churches.

Me, I had my job. Twelve-hour days, five days a week. Saturdays I spent three or four hours at the office catching up. Sundays I watched the talk shows and then it was time to start all over again. That had been my routine for nearly a decade, and in all those years I never bothered to ask myself how I came to be there. It never even struck me as the kind of thing a person ought to ask.

Four years ago, during Burton's re-election campaign for the Senate, Lewis said a funny thing to me. We're sitting in a hotel bar, drinking Miller Lite and eating peanuts, when he turns to me and says, "You got anyone, Rob?"

"Got anyone?"

"You know, a girl friend, a fiancée, somebody you care about."

Gwen flickered at the edge of my consciousness, but that was all. A flicker, nothing more.

I said, "No."

"That's good," Lewis said.

It was just the kind of thing he always said, sarcastic, a little mean-hearted. Usually I let it pass, but that night I had just enough alcohol zipping through my veins to call him on it.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Lewis turned to look at me.

"I was going to say, you have someone you really care about — somebody you want to spend your life with — you might want to walk away from all this."

"Why's that?"

"This job doesn't leave enough room for relationships."

He finished his beer and pushed the bottle away, his gaze steady and clear. In the dim light his scars were invisible, and I saw him then as he could have been in a better world. For maybe a moment, Lewis was one step short of handsome.

And then the moment broke.

"Good night," he said, and turned away.

A few months after that — not long before Burton won his second six-year Senate term — Libby Dixon told me Lewis was getting a divorce. I suppose he must have known the marriage was coming apart around him.

But at the time nothing like that even occurred to me.

After Lewis left, I just sat at the bar running those words over in my mind. *This job doesn't leave much room for relationships*, he had said, and I knew he had intended it as a warning. But what I felt instead was a bottomless sense of relief. I was perfectly content to be alone.

BURTON WAS DOING an event in St. Louis when the nursing home called to say that Gran had fallen again. Eighty-one-year-old bones are fragile, and the last time I had been out there — just after the convention — Gran's case manager had privately informed me that another fall would probably do it.

"Do what?" I had asked.

The case manager looked away. She shuffled papers on her desk while her meaning bore in on me: another fall would kill her.

I suppose I must have known this at some level, but to hear it articulated so baldly shook me. From the time I was four, Gran had been the single stable institution in my life. I had been visiting in Long Beach, half a continent from home, when my family — my parents and sister — died in the car crash. It took the state police back in Pennsylvania nearly

a day to track me down. I still remember the moment: Gran's mask-like expression as she hung up the phone, her hands cold against my face as she knelt before me.

She made no sound as she wept. Tears spilled down her cheeks, leaving muddy tracks in her make-up, but she made no sound at all. "I love you, Robert," she said. She said, "You must be strong."

That's my first true memory.

Of my parents, my sister, I remember nothing at all. I have a snapshot of them at a beach somewhere, maybe six months before I was born: my father lean and smoking, my mother smiling, her abdomen just beginning to swell. In the picture, Alice — she would have been four then — stands just in front of them, a happy blond child cradling a plastic shovel. When I was a kid I used to stare at that photo, wondering how you can miss people you never even knew. I did though, an almost physical ache way down inside me, the kind of phantom pain amputees must feel.

A ghost of that old pain squeezed my heart as the case manager told me about Gran's fall. "We got lucky," she said. "She's going to be in a wheelchair a month or two, but she's going to be okay."

Afterward, I talked to Gran herself, her voice thin and querulous, addled with pain killers. "Robert," she said, "I want you to come out here. I want to see you."

"I want to see you, too," I said, "but I can't get away right now. As soon as the election's over — "

"I'm an old woman," she told me crossly. "I may not be here after the election."

I managed a laugh at that, but the laugh sounded hollow even in my own ears. The words had started a grim little movie unreeling in my head — a snippet of Gran's cold body staggering to its feet, that somehow inhuman tomb light shining out from behind its eyes. I suppose most of us must have imagined something like that during those weeks, but it unnerved me all the same. It reminded me too much of the dreams. It felt like I was there again, gazing out into the faces of the implacable dead, that enormous clock banging out the hours.

"Robert — " Gran was saying, and I could hear the Demerol singing in her voice. "Are you there, Ro — "

And for no reason at all, I said:

"Did my parents have a clock, Gran?"

"A clock?"

"A grandfather clock."

She was silent so long I thought maybe *she* had hung up.

"That was your uncle's clock," she said finally, her voice thick and distant.

"My uncle?"

"Don," she said. "On your father's side."

"What happened to the clock?"

"Robert, I want you to come out he —"

"*What happened to the clock, Gran?*"

"Well, how would I know?" she said. "He couldn't keep it, could he? I suppose he must have sold it."

"What do you mean?"

But she didn't answer.

I listened to the swell and fall of Demerol sleep for a moment, and then the voice of the case manager filled my ear. "She's drifted off. If you want, I can call back later —"

I looked up as a shadow fell across me. Lewis stood in the doorway.

"No, that's okay. I'll call her in the morning."

I hung up the phone and stared over the desk at him. He had a strange expression on his face.

"What?" I said.

"It's Dana Maguire."

"What about her?"

"They've found her."

Eight hours later, I touched down at Logan under a cloudy midnight sky. We had hired a private security firm to find her, and one of their agents — an expressionless man with the build of an ex-athlete — met me at the gate.

"You hook up with the ad people all right?" I asked in the car, and from the way he answered, a monosyllabic "Fine," you could tell what he thought of ad people.

"The crew's in place?"

"They're already rigging the lights."

"How'd you find her?"

He glanced at me, streetlight shadow rippling across his face like water. "Dead people ain't got much imagination. Soon's we get the fresh ones in the ground, they're out there digging." He laughed humorlessly. "You'd think people'd stop burying em."

"It's the ritual, I guess."

"Maybe." He paused. Then: "Finding her, we put some guys on the cemeteries and kept our eyes open, that's all."

"Why'd it take so long?"

For a moment there was no sound in the car but the hum of tires on pavement and somewhere far away a siren railing against the night. The agent rolled down his window and spat emphatically into the slipstream. "City the size of Boston," he said, "it has a lot of fucking cemeteries."

The cemetery in question turned out to be everything I could have hoped for: remote and unkempt, with weathered gothic tombstones right off a Hollywood back lot. And wouldn't it be comforting to think so, I remember thinking as I got out of the car — the ring of lights atop the hill nothing more than stage dressing, the old world as it had been always. But it wasn't, of course, and the ragged figures digging at the grave weren't actors, either. You could smell them for one, the stomach-wrenching stench of decay. A light rain had begun to fall, too, and it had the feel of a genuine Boston drizzle, cold and steady toward the bleak fag end of December.

Andy, the director, turned when he heard me.

"Any trouble?" I asked.

"No. They don't care much what we're about, long as we don't interfere."

"Good."

Andy pointed. "There she is, see?"

"Yeah, I see her."

She was on her knees in the grass, still wearing the dress she had been buried in. She dug with single-minded intensity, her arms caked with mud to the elbow, her face empty of anything remotely human. I stood and stared at her for a while, trying to decide what it was I was feeling.

"You all right?" Andy said.

"What?"

"I said, are you all right? For a second there, I thought you were crying."

"No," I said. "I'm fine. It's the rain, that's all."

"Right."

So I stood there and half-listened while he filled me in. He had several cameras running, multiple filters and angles, he was playing with the lights. He told me all this and none of it meant anything at all to me. None of it mattered as long as I got the footage I wanted. Until then, there was nothing for me here.

He must have been thinking along the same lines, for when I turned to go, he called after me: "Say, Rob, you needn't have come out tonight, you know."

I looked back at him, the rain pasting my hair against my forehead and running down into my eyes. I shivered. "I know," I said. A moment later, I added: "I just — I wanted to see her somehow."

But Andy had already turned away.

I STILL REMEMBER the campaign ad, my own private nightmare dressed up in cinematic finery. Andy and I cobbled it together on Christmas Eve, and just after midnight in a darkened Boston studio, we cracked open a bottle of bourbon in celebration and sat back to view the final cut. I felt a wave of nausea roll over me as the first images flickered across the monitor. Andy had shot the whole thing from distorted angles in grainy black and white, the film just a hair over-exposed to sharpen the contrast. Sixty seconds of derivative expressionism, some media critic dismissed it, but even he conceded it possessed a certain power.

You've seen it, too, I suppose. Who hasn't?

She will rise from her grave to haunt you, the opening title card reads, and the image holds in utter silence for maybe half a second too long. Long enough to be unsettling, Andy said, and you could imagine distracted viewers all across the heartland perking up, wondering what the hell was wrong with the sound.

The words dissolve into an image of hands, bloodless and pale, gouging at moist black earth. The hands of a child, battered and raw and smeared with the filth and corruption of the grave, digging, digging.

There's something remorseless about them, something relentless and terrible. They could dig forever, and they might, you can see that. And now, gradually, you awaken to sound: rain hissing from a midnight sky, the steady slither of wet earth underhand, and something else, a sound so perfectly lacking that it's almost palpable in its absence, the unearthly silence of the dead. Freeze frame on a tableau out of Goya or Bosch: seven or eight zombies, half-dressed and rotting, laboring tirelessly over a fresh grave.

Fade to black, another slug line, another slow dissolve.

Dana Maguire came back.

The words melt into a long shot of the child, on her knees in the poison muck of the grave. Her dress clings to her thighs, and it's a dress someone has taken some care about — white and lacy, the kind of dress you'd bury your little girl in if you had to do it — and it's ruined. All the care and heartache that went into that dress, utterly ruined. Torn and fouled and sopping. Rain slicks her blond hair black against her skull. And as the camera glides in upon Dana Maguire's face, half-shadowed and filling three-quarters of the screen, you can glimpse the wound at her throat, flushed clean and pale. Dark roses of rot bloom along the high ridge of her cheekbone. Her eyes burn with the cold hard light of vistas you never want to see, not even in your dreams.

The image holds for an instant, a mute imperative, and then, mercifully, fades. Words appear and deliquesce on an ebon screen, three phrases, one by one:

The dead have spoken.

Now it's your turn.

Burton for president.

Andy touched a button. A reel caught and reversed itself. The screen went gray, and I realized I had forgotten to breathe. I sipped at my drink.

The whiskey burned in my throat, it made me feel alive.

"What do you think?" Andy said.

"I don't know. I don't know what to think."

Grinning, he ejected the tape and tossed it in my lap. "Merry Christmas," he said, raising his glass. "To our savior born."

And so we drank again.

Dizzy with exhaustion, I made my way back to my hotel and slept for

eleven hours straight. I woke around noon on Christmas day. An hour later, I was on a plane.

BY THE TIME I caught up to the campaign in Richmond, Lewis was in a rage, pale and apoplectic, his acne scars flaring an angry red. "You seen these?" he said, thrusting a sheaf of papers at me.

I glanced through them quickly — more bad news from Angela Dey, Burton slipping further in the polls — and then I set them aside. "Maybe this'll help," I said, holding up the tape Andy and I had cobbled together.

We watched it together, all of us, Lewis and I, the entire senior staff, Burton himself, his face grim as the first images flickered across the screen. Even now, viewing it for the second time, I could feel its impact. And I could see it in the faces of the others as well — Dey's jaw dropping open, Lewis snorting in disbelief. As the screen froze on the penultimate image — Dana Maguire's decay-ravaged face — Libby Dixon turned away.

"There's no way we can run that," she said.

"We've got — " I began, but Dey interrupted me.

"She's right, Rob. It's not a campaign ad, it's a horror movie." She turned to Burton, drumming his fingers quietly at the head of the table. "You put this out there, you'll drop ten points, I guarantee it."

"Lewis?" Burton asked.

Lewis pondered the issue for a moment, rubbing his pitted cheek with one crooked finger. "I agree," he said finally. "The ad's a frigging nightmare. It's not the answer."

"The ad's revolting," Libby said. "The media will eat us alive for politicizing the kid's death."

"We ought to be politicizing it," I said. "We ought to make it mean something."

"You run that ad, Rob," Lewis said, "every redneck in America is going to remember you threatening to take away their guns. You want to make that mistake twice?"

"Is it a mistake? For Christ's sake, the dead are walking, Lewis. The old rules don't apply." I turned to Libby. "What's Stoddard say, Libby, can you tell me that?"

"He hasn't touched it since election day."

"Exactly. He hasn't said a thing, not about Dana Maguire, not about the dead people staggering around in the street. Ever since the FEC overturned the election, he's been dodging the issue — "

"Because it's political suicide," Dey said. "He's been dodging it because it's the right thing to do."

"Bullshit," I snapped. "It's *not* the right thing to do. It's pandering and it's cowardice — it's moral cowardice — and if we do it we deserve to lose."

You could hear everything in the long silence that ensued — cars passing in the street, a local staffer talking on the phone in the next room, the faint tattoo of Burton's fingers against the formica table top. I studied him for a moment, and once again I had that sense of something else speaking through me, as though I were merely a conduit for another voice.

"What do you think about guns, sir?" I asked. "What do you really think?"

Burton didn't answer for a long moment. When he did, I think he surprised everyone at the table. "The death rate by handguns in this country is triple that for every other industrialized nation on the planet," he said. "They ought to be melted into pig iron, just like Rob said. Let's go with the ad."

"Sir — " Dey was standing.

"I've made up my mind," Burton said. He picked up the sheaf of papers at his elbow and shuffled through them. "We're down in Texas and California, we're slipping in Michigan and Ohio." He tossed the papers down in disgust. "Stoddard looks good in the south, Angela. What do we got to lose?"

We couldn't have timed it better.

The new ad went into national saturation on December 30th, in the shadow of a strange new year. I was watching a bowl game in my hotel room the first time I saw it on the air. It chilled me all over, as though I'd never seen it before. Afterward, the room filled with the sound of the ball game, but now it all seemed hollow. The cheers of the fans rang with a labored gaiety, the crack of pads had the crisp sharpness of movie sound effects. A barb of loneliness pierced me. I would have called someone, but I had no one to call.

Snapping off the television, I pocketed my key-card.

Downstairs, the same football game was playing, but at least there was liquor and a ring of conversation in the air. A few media folks from Burton's entourage clustered around the bar, but I begged off when they invited me to join them. I sat at a table in the corner instead, staring blindly at the television and drinking scotch without any hurry, but without any effort to keep track either. I don't know how much I drank that night, but I was a little unsteady when I stood to go.

I had a bad moment on the way back to my room. When the elevator doors slid apart, I found I couldn't remember my room number. I couldn't say for sure I had even chosen the right floor. The hotel corridor stretched away before me, bland and anonymous, a hallway of locked doors behind which only strangers slept. The endless weary grind of the campaign swept over me, and suddenly I was sick of it all — the long midnight flights and the hotel laundries, the relentless blur of cities and smiling faces. I wanted more than anything else in the world to go home. Not my cramped apartment in the District either.

Home. Wherever that was.

Independent of my brain, my fingers had found my key-card. I tugged it from my pocket and studied it grimly. I had chosen the right floor after all.

Still in my clothes, I collapsed across my bed and fell asleep. I don't remember any dreams, but sometime in the long cold hour before dawn, the phone yanked me awake. "Turn on CNN," Lewis said. I listened to him breathe as I fumbled for the remote and cycled through the channels.

I punched up the volume.

" — unsubstantiated reports out of China concerning newly awakened dead in remote regions of the Tibetan Plateau — "

I was awake now, fully awake. My head pounded. I had to work up some spit before I could speak.

"Anyone got anything solid?" I asked.

"I'm working with a guy in State for confirmation. So far we got nothing but rumor."

"If it's true — "

"If it's true," Lewis said, "you're gonna look like a fucking genius."

Our numbers were soft in the morning, but things were looking up by mid-afternoon. The Chinese weren't talking and no one yet had footage of

the Tibetan dead — but rumors were trickling in from around the globe. Unconfirmed reports from U.N. Peacekeepers in Kosovo told of women and children clawing their way free from previously unknown mass graves.

By New Year's Day, rumors gave away to established fact. The television flickered with grainy images from Grozny and Addis Ababa. The dead were arising in scattered locales around the world. And here at home, the polls were shifting. Burton's crowds grew larger and more enthusiastic at every rally, and as our jet winged down through the night toward Pittsburgh, I watched Stoddard answering questions about the crisis on a satellite feed from C-SPAN. He looked gray and tired, his long face brimming with uncertainty. He was too late, we owned the issue now, and watching him, I could see he knew it, too. He was going through the motions, that was all.

There was a celebratory hum in the air as the plane settled to the tarmac. Burton spoke for a few minutes at the airport, and then the Secret Service people tightened the bubble, moving us en masse toward the motorcade. Just before he ducked into the limo, Burton dismissed his entourage. His hand closed about my shoulder. "You're with me," he said.

He was silent as the limo slid away into the night, but as the downtown towers loomed up before us he turned to look at me. "I wanted to thank you," he said.

"There's no — "

He held up his hand. "I wouldn't have had the courage to run that ad, not without you pushing me. I've wondered about that, you know. It was like you knew something, like you knew the story was getting ready to break again."

I could sense the question behind his words — *Did you know, Rob? Did you?* — but I didn't have any answers. Just that impression of a voice speaking through me from beyond, from somewhere else, and that didn't make any sense, or none that I was able to share.

"When I first got started in this business," Burton was saying, "there was a local pol back in Chicago, kind of a mentor. He told me once you could tell what kind of man you were dealing with by the people he chose to surround himself with. When I think about that, I feel good, Rob." He

sighed. "The world's gone crazy, that's for sure, but with people like you on our side, I think we'll be all right. I just wanted to tell you that."

"Thank you, sir."

He nodded. I could feel him studying me as I gazed out the window, but suddenly I could find nothing to say. I just sat there and watched the city slide by, the past welling up inside me. Unpleasant truths lurked like rocks just beneath the visible surface. I could sense them somehow.

"You all right, Rob?"

"Just thinking," I said. "Being in Pittsburgh, it brings back memories."

"I thought you grew up in California."

"I did. I was born here, though. I lived here until my parents died."

"How old were you?"

"Four. I was four years old."

We were at the hotel by then. As the motorcade swung across two empty lanes into the driveway, Gran's words —

— *that was your uncle's clock, he couldn't keep it —*

— sounded in my head. The limo eased to the curb. Doors slammed. Agents slid past outside, putting a protective cordon around the car. The door opened, and cold January air swept in. Burton was gathering his things.

"Sir — "

He paused, looking back.

"Tomorrow morning, could I have some time alone?"

He frowned. "I don't know, Rob, the schedule's pretty tight — "

"No, sir. I mean — I mean a few hours off."

"Something wrong?"

"There's a couple of things I'd like to look into. My parents and all that. Just an hour or two if you can spare me."

He held my gaze a moment longer.

Then: "That's fine, Rob." He reached out and squeezed my shoulder.

"Just be at the airport by two."

That night I dreamed of a place that wasn't quite Dana Maguire's daycare. It *looked* like a daycare — half a dozen squealing kids, big plastic toys, an indestructible grade of carpet — but certain details didn't fit: the

massive grandfather clock, my uncle's clock, standing in one corner; my parents, dancing to big band music that seemed to emanate from nowhere.

I was trying to puzzle this through when I saw the kid clutching the lunch sack. There was an odd expression on his face, a haunted heart-broken expression, and too late I understood what was about to happen. I was trying to move, to scream, anything, as he dragged the pistol out of the bag. But my lips were sealed, I couldn't speak. Glancing down, I saw that I was rooted to the floor. Literally *rooted*. My bare feet had grown these long knotted tendrils. The carpet was twisted and raveled where they had driven themselves into the floor.

My parents whirled about in an athletic fox trot, their faces manic with laughter. The music was building to an awful crescendo, percussives bleeding seamlessly together, the snap of the snare drums, the terrible booming tones of the clock, the quick sharp report of the gun.

I saw the girl go over backward, her hands clawing at her throat as she convulsed. Blood drenched me, a spurting arterial fountain — I could feel it hot against my skin — and in the same moment this five-year-old kid turned to stare at me. Tears streamed down his cheeks, and this kid — this child really, and that's all I could seem to think —

— *he's just a child he's only a child* —

— he had my face.

I woke then, stifling a scream. Silence gripped the room and the corridor beyond it, and beyond that the city. I felt as if the world itself were drowning, sunk fathoms deep in the fine and private silence of the grave.

I stood, brushing the curtains aside. An anonymous grid of lights burned beyond the glass, an alien hieroglyph pulsing with enigmatic significance. Staring out at it, I was seized by an impression of how fragile everything is, how thin the barrier that separates us from the abyss. I shrank from the window, terrified by a sense that the world was far larger — and immeasurably stranger — than the world I'd known before, a sense of vast and formless energies churning out there in the dark.

I spent the next morning in the Carnegie Library in Oakland, reeling through back issues of the *Post-Gazette*. It didn't take long to dig up the article about the accident — I knew the date well enough — but I wasn't

quite prepared for what I found there. Gran had always been reticent about the wreck — about everything to do with my life in Pittsburgh, actually — but I'd never really paused to give that much thought. She'd lost her family, too, after all — a grand-daughter, a son-in-law, her only child — and even as a kid, I could see why she might not want to talk about it.

The headline flickering on the microfilm reader rocked me, though. *Two die in fiery collision*, it read, and before I could properly formulate the question in my mind —

— *there were three of them* —

— I was scanning the paragraphs below. Disconnected phrases seemed to hover above the cramped columns — bridge abutment, high speed, alcohol-related — and halfway through the article, the following words leapt out at me:

Friends speculate that the accident may have been the product of a suicide pact. The couple were said to be grief-stricken following the death of their daughter, Alice, nine, in a bizarre shooting accident three weeks ago.

I stood, abruptly nauseated, afraid to read any further. A docent approached —

"Sir, are you all — "

— but I thrust her away.

Outside, traffic lumbered by, stirring the slush on Forbes Avenue. I sat on a bench and fought the nausea for a long time, cradling my face in my hands while I waited for it to pass. A storm was drifting in, and when I felt better I lifted my face to the sky, anxious for the icy burn of snow against my cheeks. Somewhere in the city, Grant Burton was speaking. Somewhere, reanimated corpses scabbled at frozen graves.

The world lurched on.

I stood, belting my coat. I had a plane to catch.

I held myself together for two days, during our final campaign swing through the midwest on January 3rd and the election that followed, but I think I had already arrived at a decision. Most of the senior staff sensed it, as well, I think. They congratulated me on persuading Burton to run the

ad, but they didn't come to me for advice much in those final hours. I seemed set apart somehow, isolated, contagious.

Lewis clapped me on the back as we watched the returns roll in. "Jesus, Rob," he said, "you're supposed to be happy right now."

"Are you, Lewis?"

I looked up at him, his tall figure slumped, his face a fiery map of scars.

"What did you give up to get us here?" I asked, but he didn't answer. I hadn't expected him to.

The election unfolded without a hitch. Leaving off their work in the graveyards, the dead gathered about the polling stations, but even they seemed to sense that the rules had changed this time around. They made no attempt to cast their ballots. They just stood behind the cordons the National Guard had set up, still and silent, regarding the proceedings with flat remorseless eyes. Voters scurried past them with bowed heads, their faces pinched against the stench of decay. On *Nightline*, Ted Koppel noted that the balloting had drawn the highest turnout in American history, something like ninety-three percent.

"Any idea why so many voters came out today?" he asked the panel.

"Maybe they were afraid not to," Cokie Roberts replied, and I felt an answering chord vibrate within me. Trust Cokie to get it right.

Stoddard conceded soon after the polls closed in the West. It was obvious by then. In his victory speech, Burton talked about a mandate for change. "The people have spoken," he said, and they had, but I couldn't help wondering what might be speaking through them, and what it might be trying to say. Some commentators speculated that it was over now. The dead would return to the graves, the world would be the old world we had known.

But that's not the way it happened.

On January 5th, the dead were digging once again, their numbers always swelling. CNN was carrying the story when I handed Burton my resignation. He read it slowly and then he lifted his gaze to my face.

"I can't accept this, Rob," he said. "We need you now. The hard work's just getting underway."

"I'm sorry, sir. I haven't any choice."

"Surely we can work something out."

"I wish we could."

We went through several iterations of this exchange before he nodded. "We'll miss you," he said. "You'll always have a place here, whenever you're ready to get back in the game."

I was at the door when he called to me again.

"Is there anything I can do to help, Rob?"

"No, sir," I said. "I have to take care of this myself."

I SPENT A WEEK in Pittsburgh, walking the precipitous streets of neighborhoods I remembered only in my dreams. I passed a morning hunting up the house where my parents had lived, and one bright, cold afternoon I drove out 76 and pulled my rental to the side of the interstate, a hundred yards short of the bridge where they died. Eighteen-wheelers thundered past, throwing up glittering arcs of spray, and the smell of the highway enveloped me, diesel and iron. It was pretty much what I had expected, a slab of faceless concrete, nothing more.

We leave no mark.

Evenings, I took solitary meals in diners and talked to Gran on the telephone — tranquil gossip about the old folks in the home mostly, empty of anything real. Afterward, I drank Iron City and watched cable movies until I got drunk enough to sleep. I ignored the news as best I could, but I couldn't help catching glimpses as I buzzed through the channels. All around the world, the dead were walking.

They walked in my dreams, as well, stirring memories better left forgotten. Mornings, I woke with a sense of dread, thinking of Galileo, thinking of the Church. I had urged Burton to engage this brave new world, yet the thought of embracing such a fundamental transformation of my own history — of following through on the article in the *Post-Gazette*, the portents within my dreams — paralyzed me utterly. I suppose it was by then a matter mostly of verifying my own fears and suspicions — suppose I already knew, at some level, what I had yet to confirm. But the lingering possibility of doubt was precious, safe, and I clung to it for a few days longer, unwilling to surrender.

Finally, I could put it off no longer.

I drove down to the Old Public Safety Building on Grant Street. Upstairs, a grizzled receptionist brought out the file I requested. It was all

there in untutored bureaucratic prose. There was a sheaf of official photos, too, glossy black and white prints. I didn't want to look at them, but I did anyway. I felt it was something I ought to do.

A little while later, someone touched my shoulder. It was the receptionist, her broad face creased with concern. Her spectacles swung at the end of a little silver chain as she bent over me. "You all right?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm fine."

I stood, closing the file, and thanked her for her time.

I left Pittsburgh the next day, shedding the cold as the plane nosed above a lid of cloud. From LAX, I caught the 405 south to Long Beach. I drove with the window down, grateful for the warmth upon my arm, the spike of palm fronds against the sky. The slipstream carried the scent of a world blossoming and fresh, a future yet unmade, a landscape less scarred by history than the blighted industrial streets I'd left behind.

Yet even here the past lingered. It was the past that had brought me here, after all.

The nursing home was a sprawl of landscaped grounds and low-slung stucco buildings, faintly Spanish in design. I found Gran in a garden overlooking the Pacific, and I paused, studying her, before she noticed me in the doorway. She held a paperback in her lap, but she had left off reading to stare out across the water. A salt-laden breeze lifted her gray hair in wisps, and for a moment, looking at her, her eyes clear in her distinctly boned face, I could find my way back to the woman I had known as a boy.

But the years intervened, the way they always do. In the end, I couldn't help noticing her wasted body, or the glittering geometry of the wheelchair that enclosed her. Her injured leg jutted before her.

I must have sighed, for she looked up, adjusting the angle of the chair. "Robert!"

"Gran."

I sat by her, on a concrete bench. The morning overcast was breaking, and the sun struck sparks from the wave-tops.

"I'd have thought you were too busy to visit," she said, "now that your man has won the election."

"I'm not so busy these days. I don't work for him anymore."

"What do you mean — "

"I mean I quit my job."

"Why?" she said.

"I spent some time in Pittsburgh. I've been looking into things."

"Looking into things? Whatever on Earth is there to look *into*, Robert?" She smoothed the afghan covering her thighs, her fingers trembling.

I laid my hand across them, but she pulled away. "Gran, we need to talk."

"Talk?" She laughed, a bark of forced gaiety. "We talk every day."

"Look at me," I said, and after a long moment, she did. I could see the fear in her eyes, then. I wondered how long it had been there, and why I'd never noticed it before. "We need to talk about the past."

"The past is dead, Robert."

Now it was my turn to laugh. "Nothing's dead, Gran. Turn on the television sometime. Nothing stays dead anymore. *Nothing*."

"I don't want to talk about that."

"Then what do you want to talk about?" I waved an arm at the building behind us, the ammonia-scented corridors and the endless numbered rooms inhabited by faded old people, already ghosts of the dead they would become. "You want to talk about Cora in 203 and the way her son never visits her or Jerry in 147 whose emphysema has been giving him trouble or all the — "

"All the what?" she snapped, suddenly fierce.

"All the fucking minutiae we always talk about!"

"I won't have you speak to me like that! I raised you, I made you what you are today!"

"I know," I said. And then, more quietly, I said it again. "I know."

Her hands twisted in her lap. "The doctors told me you'd forget, it happens that way sometimes with trauma. You were so *young*. It seemed best somehow to just...let it go."

"But you lied."

"I didn't choose any of this," she said. "After it happened, your parents sent you out to me. Just for a little while, they said. They needed time to think things through."

She fell silent, squinting at the surf foaming on the rocks below. The

sun bore down upon us, a heartbreaking disk of white in the faraway sky.

"I never thought they'd do what they did," she said, "and then it was too late. After that...how could I tell you?" She clenched my hand. "You seemed okay, Robert. You seemed like you were fine."

I stood, pulling away. "How could you know?"

"Robert — "

I turned at the door. She'd wheeled the chair around to face me. Her leg thrust toward me in its cast, like the prow of a ship. She was in tears. "Why, Robert? Why couldn't you just leave everything alone?"

"I don't know," I said, but even then I was thinking of Lewis, that habit he has of probing at his face where the acne left it pitted — as if someday he'll find his flesh smooth and handsome once again, and it's through his hands he'll know it. I guess that's it, you know: we've all been wounded, every one of us.

And we just can't keep our hands off the scars.

I drifted for the next day or two, living out of hotel rooms and haunting the places I'd known growing up. They'd changed like everything changes, the world always hurrying us along, but I didn't know what else to do, where else to go. I couldn't leave Long Beach, not till I made things up with Gran, but something held me back.

I felt ill at ease, restless. And then, as I fished through my wallet in a bar one afternoon, I saw a tiny slip of paper eddy to the floor. I knew what it was, of course, but I picked it up anyway. My fingers shook as I opened it up and stared at the message written there, *Call me some time*, with the address and phone number printed neatly below.

I made it to Laguna Beach in fifty minutes. The address was a mile or so east of the water, a manicured duplex on a corner lot. She had moved, no doubt — five years had passed — and if she hadn't moved she had married at the very least. But I left my car at the curb and walked up the sidewalk all the same. I could hear the bell through an open window, footsteps approaching, soft music lilting from the back of the house. Then the door opened and she was there, wiping her hands on a towel.

"Gwen," I said.

She didn't smile, but she didn't close the door either.

It was a start.

The house was small, but light, with wide windows in the kitchen overlooking a lush back lawn. A breeze slipped past the screens, infusing the kitchen with the scent of fresh-cut grass and the faraway smell of ocean.

"This isn't a bad time, is it?" I asked.

"Well, it's unexpected to say the least," she told me, lifting one eyebrow doubtfully, and in the gesture I caught a glimpse of the girl I'd known at Northwestern, rueful and wry and always faintly amused.

As she made coffee, I studied her, still freckled and faintly gamine, but not unchanged. Her eyes had a wary light in them, and fresh lines caged her thin upper lip. When she sat across from me at the table, toying with her coffee cup, I noticed a faint pale circle around her finger where a ring might have been.

Maybe I looked older too, for Gwen glanced up at me from beneath a fringe of streaky blonde bangs, her mouth arcing in a crooked smile. "You look younger on television," she said, and it was enough to get us started.

Gwen knew a fair bit of my story — my role in Burton's presidential campaign had bought me that much notoriety at least — and hers had a familiar ring to it. Law school at UCLA, five or six years billing hours in one of the big L.A. firms before the cutthroat culture got to her and she threw it over for a job with the ACLU, trading long days and a handsome wage for still longer ones and almost no wage at all. Her marriage had come apart around the same time. "Not out of any real animosity," she said. "More like a mutual lack of interest."

"And now? Are you seeing anyone?"

The question came out with a weight I hadn't intended.

She hesitated. "No one special." She lifted the eyebrow once again. "A habit I picked up as a litigator. Risk aversion."

By this time, the sky beyond the windows had softened into twilight and our coffee had grown cold. As shadows lengthened in the little kitchen, I caught Gwen glancing at the clock.

She had plans.

I stood. "I should go."

"Right."

She took my hand at the door, a simple handshake, that's all, but I felt

something pass between us, an old connection close with a kind of electric spark. Maybe it wasn't there at all, maybe I only wanted to feel it — Gwen certainly seemed willing to let me walk out of her life once again — but a kind of desperation seized me.

Call it nostalgia or loneliness. Call it whatever you want. But suddenly the image of her wry glance from beneath the slant of hair leaped into my mind.

I wanted to see her again.

"Listen," I said, "I know this is kind of out of the blue, but you wouldn't be free for dinner would you?"

She paused a moment. The shadow of the door had fallen across her face. She laughed uncertainly, and when she spoke, her voice was husky and uncertain. "I don't know, Rob. That was a long time ago. Like I said, I'm a little risk averse these days."

"Right. Well, then, listen — it was really great seeing you."

I nodded and started across the lawn. I had the door of the rental open when she spoke again.

"What the hell," she said. "Let me make a call. It's only dinner, right?"

I WENT BACK to Washington for the inauguration. Lewis and I stood together as we waited for the ceremony to begin, looking out at the dead. They had been on the move for days, legions of them, gathering on the mall as far as the eye could see. A cluster of the living, maybe a couple hundred strong, had been herded onto the lawn before the bandstand — a token crowd of warm bodies for the television cameras — but I couldn't help thinking that Burton's true constituency waited beyond the cordons, still and silent and unutterably patient, the melting pot made flesh: folk of every color, race, creed, and age, in every stage of decay that would allow them to stand upright. Dana Maguire might be out there somewhere. She probably was.

The smell was palpable.

Privately, Lewis had told me that the dead had begun gathering elsewhere in the world, as well. Our satellites had confirmed it. In Cuba and North Korea, in Yugoslavia and Rwanda, the dead were on the move,

implacable and slow, their purposes unknown and maybe unknowable.

"We need you, Rob," he had said. "Worse than ever."

"I'm not ready yet," I replied.

He had turned to me then, his long pitted face sagging. "What happened to you?" he asked.

And so I told him.

It was the first time I had spoken of it aloud, and I felt a burden sliding from my shoulders as the words slipped out. I told him all of it: Gran's evasions and my reaction to Dana Maguire that day on CNN and the sense I'd had on *Crossfire* that something else, something vast and remote and impersonal, was speaking through me, calling them back from the grave. I told him about the police report, too, how the memories had come crashing back upon me as I sat at the scarred table, staring into a file nearly three decades old.

"It was a party," I said. "My uncle was throwing a party and Mom and Dad's babysitter had canceled at the last minute, so Don told them just to bring us along. He lived alone, you know. He didn't have kids and he never thought about kids in the house."

"So the gun wasn't locked up?"

"No. It was late. It must have been close to midnight by then. People were getting drunk and the music was loud and Alice didn't seem to want much to do with me. I was in my uncle's bedroom, just fooling around the way kids do, and the gun was in the drawer of his night stand."

I paused, memory surging through me, and suddenly I was there again, a child in my uncle's upstairs bedroom. Music thumped downstairs, jazzy big band music. I knew the grownups would be dancing and my dad would be nuzzling Mom's neck, and that night when he kissed me good night, I'd be able to smell him, the exotic aromas of bourbon and tobacco, shot through with the faint floral essence of Mom's perfume. Then my eyes fell upon the gun in the drawer. The light from the hall summoned unsuspected depths from the blued barrel.

I picked it up, heavy and cold.

All I wanted to do was show Alice. I just wanted to show her. I never meant to hurt anyone. I never meant to hurt Alice.

I said it to Lewis — "I never meant to hurt her" — and he looked away, unable to meet my eyes.

I remember carrying the gun downstairs to the foyer, Mom and Dad dancing beyond the frame of the doorway, Alice standing there watching. "I remember everything," I said to Lewis. "Everything but pulling the trigger. I remember the music screeching to a halt, somebody dragging the needle across the record, my mother screaming. I remember Alice lying on the floor and the blood and the weight of the gun in my hand. But the weird thing is, the thing I remember best is the way I felt at that moment."

"The way you felt," Lewis said.

"Yeah. A bullet had smashed the face of the clock, this big grandfather clock my uncle had in the foyer. It was chiming over and over, as though the bullet had wrecked the mechanism. That's what I remember most. The clock. I was afraid my uncle was going to be mad about the clock."

Lewis did something odd then. Reaching out, he clasped my shoulder — the first time he'd ever touched me, really *touched* me, I mean — and I realized how strange it was that this man, this scarred, bitter man, had somehow become the only friend I have. I realized something else, too: how rarely I'd known the touch of another human hand, how much I hungered for it.

"You were a kid, Rob."

"I know. It's not my fault."

"It's no reason for you to leave, not now, not when we need you. Burton would have you back in a minute. He owes this election to you, he knows that. Come back."

"Not yet," I said, "I'm not ready."

But now, staring out across the upturned faces of the dead as a cold January wind whipped across the mall, I felt the lure and pull of the old life, sure as gravity. The game, Burton had called it, and it was a game, politics, the biggest Monopoly set in the world, and I loved it and for the first time I understood *why* I loved it. For the first time I understood something else, too: why I had waited years to ring Gwen's doorbell, why even then it had taken an active effort of will not to turn away. It was the same reason: *Because* it was a game, a game with clear winners and losers, with rules as complex and arcane as a cotillion, and most of all because it partook so little of the messy turmoil of real life. The stakes seemed high, but they weren't. It was ritual, that was all — movement without action, a dance of spin and strategy designed to preserve the status quo. I fell in love with

politics because it was safe. You get so involved in pushing your token around the board that you forget the ideals that brought you to the table in the first place. You forget to speak from the heart. Someday maybe, for the right reasons, I'd come back. But not yet.

I must have said it aloud for Lewis suddenly looked over at me. "What?" he asked.

I just shook my head and gazed out over the handful of living people, stirring as the ceremony got underway. The dead waited beyond them, rank upon rank of them with the earth of the grave under their nails and that cold shining in their eyes. I read a mute imperative there. *This is your life*, it said. *Don't waste it. Live.*

Live.

And then I *did* turn to Lewis. "What do you think they want?" I asked.

Lewis sighed. "Justice, I suppose," he said.

"And when they have it?"

"Maybe they'll rest."

A year has passed, and those words — *justice, I suppose* — still haunt me. I returned to D.C. in the fall, just as the leaves began turning along the Potomac. Gwen came with me, and sometimes, as I lie wakeful in the shelter of her warmth, my mind turns to the past.

It was Gran that brought me back. The cast had come off in February, and one afternoon in March, Gwen and I stopped by, surprised to see her on her feet. She looked frail, but her eyes glinted with determination as she toiled along the corridors behind her walker.

"Let's sit down and rest," I said when she got winded, but she merely shook her head and kept moving.

"Bones knit, Rob," she told me. "Wounds heal, if you let them."

Those words haunt me, too.

By the time she died in August, she'd moved from the walker to a cane. Another month, her case manager told me with admiration, and she might have relinquished even that. We buried her in the plot where we laid my grandfather to rest, but I never went back after the interment. I know what I would find.

The dead do not sleep.

They shamble in silence through the cities of our world, their bodies

slack and stinking of the grave, their eyes coldly ablaze. Baghdad fell in September, vanquished by battalions of revolutionaries, rallying behind a vanguard of the dead. State teems with similar rumors, and CNN is on the story. Unrest in Pyongyang, turmoil in Belgrade.

In some views, Burton's has been the most successful administration in history. All around the world, our enemies are falling. Yet more and more these days, I catch the president staring uneasily into the streets of Washington, aswarm with zombies. "Our conscience," he's taken to calling them, but I'm not sure I agree. They demand nothing of us, after all. They seek no end we can perceive or understand. Perhaps they are nothing more than what we make of them, or what they enable us to make of ourselves. And so we go on, mere lodgers in a world of unpeopled graves, subject ever to the remorseless scrutiny of the dead.



COMING ATTRACTIONS

OUR MARCH ISSUE will feature a new story by Maureen F. McHugh, who seems to be writing more novels than short stories lately. In "Presence," she brings us into the near future with a poignant look at a possible cure for Alzheimer's disease.

Also on tap for next month is "Coelacanth," our latest story from Robert Reed. This one considers the future of the species, with results that are unpredictable and very provocative.

Some of the other goodies we plan to bring you in the coming months include Charles Coleman Finlay's spacebound adventure "The Political Officer," Paul Di Filippo's account of "The Short, Ashy Life of Hiram P. Dottle," a new story of Dazzle the dog from Scott Bradfield, a metaphysical baseball story by Gardner Dozois, and tales from Carol Emshwiller, Alex Irvine, David Prill, and Don Webb, to name names. Subscribe early and often.

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THE LAST REVOLUTION, BY LORD DUNSANY (1951)

LORD Dunsany's fantasies have been hugely influential, but his one sf novel is almost forgotten. By 1951 the menace of autonomous machines was an old theme indeed. It seemed fresh to Dunsany, though, and he developed it as a mixture of his own favorite clubland-raconteur mode (as in the Jorkens stories) and Wellsian scientific romance.

His narrator duly overhears a remark in the club: "Good morning, Pender. I hear you have made a Frankenstein." Intrigued, he pursues the inventor, and shortly finds himself playing chess with a sinister, crablike robot which can walk around but has to be transported in a wheelbarrow to avoid frightening Pender's Aunt Mary. The chess game grows chilly as our hero realizes he's battling an intelligence superior to his own....

Pender's pride in his creation

blinds him to what the narrator sees: that the crab-thing is deeply jealous of the attention Pender pays to his fiancée, and that it may be unwise to set the machine manufacturing more of its kind. The Last Revolution, of robots against their hubristic makers, is foreshadowed.

But Dunsany keeps everything very parochially English. His characters end up besieged by hostile crab-mechanisms in a cottage among Thames-side marshes. The police are helpless. Swayed by mysterious robotic influence, even cars and motorcycles turn against humanity. One tiny factor, though, is on our side. Just as Earthly bacteria caused the downfall of Wells's Martians, the old fool who's been futilely throwing water over the prowling robots is vindicated when they succumb to...rust. It has a quirky, period charm. ♣

—David Langford



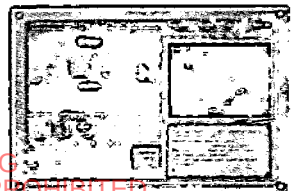
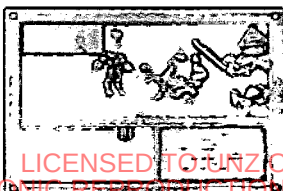
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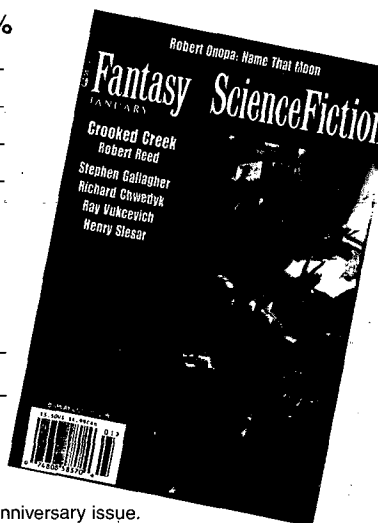
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